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HAROLD J. LASKI'S PHILOSOPHY OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM, 1925-1950

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1974

DEDICATION

To Bill, Doris, Cheryl and Cathy Barak

and

John and Joyce Reid

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of Harold Laski's philosophy of democratic socialism, as it developed between 1925 and his death in 1950. It is concerned with the interdependence Laski saw between the values of progressive democracy and socialism. He did not believe that a genuine democracy could exist without socialism, or that socialism could exist without democracy. This study systematizes and analyzes his arguments for those beliefs.

After a brief biographical introduction, which is also designed to put the problem in historical perspective, two chapters set out and evaluate Laski's case that progressive democracy requires socialism. The former deals with his general arguments about the dependence of democracy in mass society upon socialist means for its realization; the latter chapter discusses his prudential case in the 1930's that without "revolution by consent" the capitalist democracies could not stand up to the challenge of fascism.

The fourth chapter takes up Laski's belief that socialism requires democracy. Since he did not develop this position systematically, the narrative traces his substantive positions on issues involving conflicts between democratic and socialist values in the period covered by the dissertation.

The final chapter contrasts Laskian socialism with the major alternative contemporary left-wing orientations in political theory: Social Democracy, authoritarian leftism, and the so-called New Left.

The point of view expressed is that Laskian socialism still represents the best image of the most desirable attainable polity. The other orientations are criticized for their slighting of either the socialist or democratic components in democratic socialism, and a Laskian synthesis of liberal progressivism and socialism is recommended as the most viable political orientation for contemporary Western political man.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe my interest in Harold Laski to my good friend Dr. Helen B. Goetsch, now retired as Chairman of Social Studies, Washington High School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thanks are due to my friends John Reid and Michael Sullivan for their comments on the manuscript, and to Dr. Martin Cohnstaedt for discussions about the topic. Professor T. C. Pocklington directed the study and gave the benefit of his incisive criticism. Professors E. P. Murray and D. J. C. Carmichael also gave me the benefit of their critical reactions. Given my great disagreements with most of these people about the nature of political philosophy and the achievements of H. J. L., they cannot be held jointly responsible for my errors or shortcomings. I would like to thank the Canada Council for three years of support during which the study was planned and executed. Last, but not least, thanks are due Brenda Roberts for her prompt and efficient typing of the final draft.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Recent left-wing writers on democracy have produced well-documented volumes illustrating shortcomings of the democratic process and recurrent class bias in the system output of the capitalist democracies. They have debunked the myth of popular control of government and polemicized against the illusions of both academic political scientists and ordinary citizens about the compatibility of capitalism and democracy. As democratic theorists, they have seen their efforts as part of a movement for social and political change--unlike the "elitist democrats" who have supported the status quo and attacked "unreasonable expectations".¹

The focus on unmasking and exposing, on shattering illusions, has not, however, been an unmitigated blessing. While many people have undoubtedly acquired a greater degree of political sophistication, with many left-wing activists and intellectuals the effect has been to discourage any concern with democracy. Democracy is seen as nothing but a cover for "imperialism". Objections to radical political praxis on democratic grounds are dismissed as "reactionary", if not

¹See G. William Domhoff, Who Rules America? (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967); Gabriel Kolko, The Roots of American Foreign Policy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); and Ralph Miliband, The State in Capitalist Society (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

"fascist". For many, democracy is an "ideology" in Marx's sense; i.e., nothing but a cover for the existing order.

There are grounds for left-wing scepticism about arguments on the basis of democracy. Capitalist democracies are certainly very imperfectly democratic. Right-wing governments, movements and factions have, in the past, frequently been hypocritical in their concern with legality and democracy. And democracy in practice does not produce the kind of orderly steady social change so beloved of democratic theorists fond of the concept of "institutionalization of revolution".

Nevertheless, the present left-wing apathy about democracy is unwarranted and alarming. In the United States, for example, student activists have shifted in recent years from populist naivete about "participatory democracy" to authoritarian elitism. As David Kettler has noted, many have gone from "recognition that the system of competition among groups interested in various policy outcomes does not have the openness and flexibility claimed for it by pluralist apologists" to acceptance of "Trotsky's account of political democracy in Terrorism and Communism."² Left-wing critics sensitive to the importance of freedom are dismissed as "bourgeois" or put off with vague rhetoric about a "higher form of democracy".

This is unfortunate because democratic theory requires more attention, not less. It will not do to dismiss concern about freedom under socialism by reference to Marx's disinclination to speculate about the future socialist society. The experience of Stalinism, if nothing else, ought to emphasize that socialists cannot simply dismiss

²Marvin Surkin and Alan Wolfe, eds., An End to Political Science (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 34-35.

concern about freedom as "bourgeois". Then, too, there are important differences in political culture between the backward underdeveloped nations and the advanced capitalist societies. Many of these derive from the democratic features of the latter and are of prime importance in any realistic calculation of the road to power.

There are two central problems for contemporary democratic theory: first, how can democratic values be realized in the mass, technological societies characteristic of the advanced capitalist nations?; second, can necessary and desirable reforms be effected by means of democratic procedures? The former problem involves the rescue of democratic theory from its emasculation by some forms of elitist democratic theory and concrete planning for institutional reform. The latter problem is of course only partly theoretical; it is as much or more a problem of political power. Nevertheless, there has to be an initial commitment to democratic means, and given the increasing scepticism on the Left about democracy such a choice cannot be taken for granted.³

What is needed is a realistic democratic theory, equipped to take on the difficult problems facing those sincerely committed to realizing democratic values. Democratic theory must come to grips with the problem of capitalist power and the sociological characteristics of the advanced capitalist societies. It must focus on the crucial substantive issues of contemporary political life.

Harold J. Laski was concerned with the preservation of human freedom in a collectivist world. He combined in his political philosophy

³See Irving Howe, Steady Work (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1966), pp. 41-78.

the ideals of liberal or progressive democracy and commitment to socialism. The purpose of this study is to summarize and evaluate his belief that democratic socialism provides the best attainable form of policy for the advanced Western nations. Laski believed that democracy could not be realized without socialism, and that socialism would not achieve its humanist aims unless committed to democracy. The relevance of Laski lies in the truth of Barrington Moore, Jr.'s judgment that "unless future radical movements can somehow synthesize the achievements of liberalism with those of revolutionary radicalism, the results for humanity will be tragic."⁴

II

Harold J. Laski was born in Manchester, England, in 1893, the son of a prosperous Jewish cotton shipper, who was also a prominent Liberal. As a youth, he was quite precocious; he loved reading more than any other pastime. H. W. Nevinston once described him as "a young man who was forever content to sit in an easy chair with a writing pad on his lap, a pile of books on political philosophy by his side, and one unaltering view in front of him."⁵ While he was at Oxford, he broke with his family by marrying Frida Kerry, who was both a Gentile and eight years older than Laski. He was particularly influenced while at Oxford by H. A. L. Fisher and Ernest Barker, and by the writings of F. W. Maitland; he finally decided to major in history and political theory. As an undergraduate, he was active in the women's suffrage

⁴Barrington Moore, Jr., Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 192.

⁵Kingsley Martin, Harold Laski (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 14.

cause, the Fabian Society, and the Labour movement. He received his degree in 1914, and, after being rejected as unfit for military service, took up his first teaching appointment at McGill University in Canada.

From 1916 to 1920, Laski taught history at Harvard University. He was also much involved with the Harvard Law School, and edited several numbers of the Harvard Law Review. But his most important activity during his stay in North America was his writing--in six years he produced four books as well as numerous articles. Three learned volumes on the nature of sovereignty established him as an authority on the subject, and he quickly became prominent as one of the major political theorists of the point of view known as "political pluralism".

Laski's early works were mainly concerned with the elaboration of his critique of the concept of "state sovereignty", which he believed legitimated a statist authoritarianism quite incompatible with the rights and freedom of groups and individuals. His studies focused on such topics as church-state relations, conscience, regional autonomy, and the possibilities of decentralization. In his early view, the state is seen as only one social organization among many, having to bid competitively for men's allegiance by performance in meeting their demands, rather than as a sovereign organization with a legitimate and monopolistic claim upon men's obedience.⁶

⁶See H. J. Laski, Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917); Authority in the Modern State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919); and The Foundations of Sovereignty (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921).

Laski was writing in an era marked by group challenges to the supremacy of the state.⁷ His aim was to construct a theory of limited government. Given parliamentary supremacy in England, Laski looked longingly at American federalism, constitutionalism, and church-state separation. Writing as an adherent of the pragmatic school of philosophy, he asked whether the theory of sovereignty or pluralism led to better consequences. In his view, state sovereignty legitimated "state worship" (as in Imperial Germany), mistook the theory of the state for its practice, and overrated its ability to command undivided allegiance. Pluralism would, he felt, lead to freedom, genuine government by consent, and a stronger role for morality in politics.

Laski undertook to develop a theory of plural sovereignty. The state would be one association among others; it could claim precedence over other associations only when in possession of a superior moral claim. The only possible judge of such claims is the individual citizen, who has a duty to be informed and to attempt rational choice between the claims of competing authorities. Order is not to be taken as the highest value. Real sovereignty under pluralism is thus moral superiority rather than legal supremacy, the evidence for which would be general free consent. This is, for Laski, "effective will".⁸

In defending his viewpoint against charges that it would lead to anarchism, Laski insisted that he had not invented the existence of divided loyalties. He argued that progress never comes from exalting "unity" and "order" above all. (He continually identified acceptance

⁷See George Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England (New York: Smith & Haas, 1935).

⁸For Laski's most complete presentation of his point of view, see Authority in the Modern State, pp. 19-122.

of the alternative viewpoint with "state worship" like that of Imperial Germany!) He based his position on an empirical claim that men rarely revolt--a difficult and risky thing--except when they feel real and deep grievances against the status quo.

Laski's early writings are diffuse and often repetitious. The case studies are often extremely erudite term papers, full of enough esoteric allusions to send the most competent general reader to the library, with a "pluralist" conclusion tacked on at the end. There is more assertion than argument, many issues are handled with extreme brevity, and basic assumptions are rarely set out or examined. Laski's first books are very much those of a young man who has read widely, and who insists upon discussing issues in terms which take it for granted that everyone knows what he knows.

In 1920, Laski returned to England to take up a teaching post at the London School of Economics. In 1926, he succeeded Graham Wallas as Professor of Political Science. After his return to England, he was very critical of Lloyd George's coalition government and became active in Labour politics. He also served on several governmental commissions and tribunals during the 1920's.

In an autobiographical essay written in 1938, Laski wrote: "I have, I suppose, been a socialist in some degree ever since the last years of my schooldays."⁹ Laski was politically active as an undergraduate at Oxford, and belonged to the Fabian Society. In the course

⁹ Cited by Herbert A. Deane, The Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 53.

of his suffrage work, he met George Lansbury, and in the Summer of 1914 he worked as an editorial writer on the Daily Herald. But, as Kingsley Martin has noted, he was at least as much a Liberal as a Socialist. In his early books and articles, there are recurring sentiments which indicate the predominance of Liberalism in his early political thought.¹⁰

His early works contain many passages critical of socialism.

For example:

Nor is the alternative of complete state management more inviting. Indeed, it may without exaggeration be suggested that the evils such a regime would imply are hardly less great than those of the present system. For to surrender to government officials not merely political but also industrial administration is to create a bureaucracy more powerful than the world has ever seen.¹¹

Or:

However beneficial may be the consequence of social legislation--and that a large part of it does confer benefit is unquestionable--it does not compensate for improvements wrought out with their own minds by those upon whom benefit is conferred. Social legislation has the incurable habit of tending toward paternalism; and paternalism, however wide be the basis of consent upon which it is erected, is the subtlest form of poison to the democratic state.¹²

In his correspondence with Mr. Justice Holmes, Laski was even more hostile to Socialism:

¹⁰But see Laski, Authority in the Modern State, pp. 29-30, 38-40, 44-48, 81-88, 113-114; and The Foundations of Sovereignty, pp. 62-65, 76-82, 94-100. These passages foreshadow his later socialism.

¹¹Laski, Authority in the Modern State, pp. 94-95.

¹²H. J. Laski, The Foundations of Sovereignty, p. 43.

A great book is to be written (I am going to write it) on the decline of liberty as a result of the increased power of the state.¹³

The greatest discovery of the war is the relentless bureaucracy involved in state-socialism and its utter incompatibility with liberty.¹⁴

I suppose American worship of regulation has two main roots (1) natural reaction from the late period of laissez-faire (2) an admiring imitation of the success of centralization in Germany. I feel that the whole thing is going much too far though certain large principles--like the regulation of hours of labor--I agree with heartily.¹⁵

As late as 1925, Laski writes to Holmes:

Felix [Frankfurter] writes of a book he is doing which pleases me immensely. As did his opposition to the Child Labor Amendment, which I keenly share. For while I think child labor is an outrage, I am convinced that the process of constitutional amendment was not intended to be a substitute for gaining conviction. People who live under a federal system must accept its implications.¹⁶

In an earlier letter to Holmes, Laski wrote of himself: "I am too entirely medieval to be of use in the practical world. I was probably made to be a rural dean or private secretary to another

¹³ M. A. DeWolfe How, ed., The Holmes-Laski Letters (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), I, P. 113.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 117. Cf. pp. 49-50, 113, 130, 201, 316, 334.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 721. Cf. Thurman W. Arnold, The Folklore of Capitalism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), p. 383: "Liberals and intellectuals usually fail as political organizers because they desire their slogans to be accurate and logical rather than political...They are the very worst kind of combat troops because they are constantly siding with the enemy...Thus we find Oswald Garrison Villard, the great liberal, joining with the Liberty League to defeat the court plan of President Roosevelt, on perfectly logical grounds but unmindful that political battles are wars between opposing groups."

sceptic."¹⁷ Indeed, Laski in his early writings is very much the abstract, cloistered political philosopher. He is the university professor, the lecturer, and the would-be great writer. He is sceptical of democracy, socialism, progress and state paternalism. He lives in a world of books. He has a favorable opinion of Stanley Baldwin and Warren Harding.¹⁸

Thus, the younger Laski was basically a Liberal rather than a Socialist. A Grammar of Politics, published in 1925, marks the turning-point. It took a long process of conversion for Laski to become a Socialist, and even longer for him to become sympathetic to Marxism. His early writings are filled with uncomplimentary references to Karl Marx. If anything, Laski was even less impressed with the concrete representatives of "Marxism" with whom he came into contact.¹⁹ His conversion was due in part to efforts of people like the Webbs and R. H. Tawney; but it was for the most part the result of the logic of events. According to Kingsley Martin, "the essential difference between Laski, the Marxist, in 1938, and Laski, the Fabian, in 1925, was that between the two dates he had seen the great slump of

¹⁷Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 42-43, 45, 49-50, 53, 113; 48-51, 108-9; 45, 66, 89, 110; 124-125, 184-186, 379; 665 and 524. These refer to Laski's scepticism about democracy and progress, his bookishness, his ambitions, and his opinions of Baldwin and Harding. Years later of course Laski was to be remembered primarily for his career as an activist. Cf. Max Lerner: "He helped break the mold of the British gentleman-scholar. He may or may not have been a great scholar, but he was certainly no 'gentleman'." American Political Science Review L (June, 1956), 523.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 84-85, 201, 205-206, 358, 366, 370.

1929, the constitutional device of National government in 1931...and the widespread decline of democratic institutions."²⁰

In the 'thirties his writings began to take on decidedly Marxist overtones. In a trilogy--Democracy in Crisis (1933), The State in Theory and Practice (1935), and The Rise of European Liberalism (1936)--he undertook to explain modern European history and contemporary politics from a non-dogmatic yet clearly Marxist position. In 1938, he applied his new analytic framework to British politics in a very untextbook-like volume entitled Parliamentary Government in England. H. N. Brailsford remarked of one of Laski's books in the mid-'thirties:

The bravest and probably the most fundamental argument for Socialism that has yet appeared in our language...A book so unusual and unflinching from a man in his position is much more than a book: it is an event. It marks a phase in the breakdown of the capitalist system.²¹

In his books and articles, Laski argued that liberal values and democracy could only be protected by a thorough-going democratic socialism; and that continued support of capitalism by liberals and democrats could only lead to disaster, i.e., ultimately, to fascism. Laski's activities in the Left Book Club belong to this period, and it was in 1937 that he was first elected to the National Executive Committee of the British Labour Party. He was generally sympathetic, though not uncritically so, to the U.S.S.R. during the 1930's. He was active before 1939 in the Popular Front movement, and was one of its most important international spokesmen. He put his talents as a lecturer and publicist into the cause of a "united front" against

²⁰Kingsley Martin, Harold Laski, p. 69.

²¹Daily Herald review of The State in Theory and Practice, quoted on the dust jacket of the 1967 impression.

fascism, but dropped such activities after they were condemned by the Labour Party Executive in 1939.

After the Hitler-Stalin pact and the outbreak of World War II, Laski's main non-teaching activities were connected with the British war effort. He wrote tracts like Is This An Imperialist War? (1939), Where Do We Go From Here? (1940), and The Strategy of Freedom (1941). In addition, he was adviser to Clement Attlee after the latter became Deputy Prime Minister in 1940. He was also a frequent speaker at Labour meetings and army camps. In his most important war-time books, Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time (1943) and Faith, Reason and Civilization (1944), he argued that the way to make worthwhile the sacrifices for victory was to combine immediate socialism in the Western democracies with cooperation with the U.S.S.R. in an international popular front to achieve a lasting peace.

In 1945, Laski was Chairman of the Labour Party. He tried in writings and speeches to articulate his vision of the postwar world, but after Labour's victory in the 1945 election he was often criticized by members of the government for his activities.²² On issues like Israel and relations with the U.S.S.R., Laski found himself very much out of sympathy with the policies pursued by the Labour Government. He unwillingly became a "'notorious' public figure" when he

²²Cf. Clement Attlee on Laski: "People who talk too much soon find themselves up against it. Harold Laski, for instance. A brilliant chap...but he started making speeches at weekends. I had to get rid of him." See E. P. Thompson, ed., Out of Apathy (London: Stevens, 1960), p. 293.

sued a newspaper which had wrongly reported that he had advocated violent revolution in England, but then lost the case.

In 1949, he resigned from the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party. Much of his last work was devoted to the interpretation of American politics. The American Democracy (1948) and Trade Unions in the New Society (1949) argued that America's postwar alternatives were to lead a new reactionary Holy Alliance against communism or to develop a strong labor party to safeguard and extend the American democratic tradition. Laski took the same point of view in debate with George F. Kennan. In an unpublished manuscript, later published posthumously as The Dilemma of Our Times (1952), he tried to come to grips with the failure of his hopes for democratic socialism and world peace.

Although he was tired and ill, Laski campaigned actively for the Labour Party in the general election of 1950. He died a few weeks after the election, on March 24, 1950. Although he had started out as an abstract political philosopher, Laski made his reputation as a political activist and theoretician of democratic socialism. In Felix Frankfurter's words, what Laski was about was "socialism plus habeas corpus". That mixture or synthesis is the subject of this study in the political philosophy of Harold J. Laski.

III

Harold Laski was very influential both in Great Britain and the United States between 1925 and 1950. Since his death, his reputation as a political theorist has been much higher among African and Asian intellectuals than in the West. The so-called "end of ideology" and the challenge of Soviet Communism set the context of Western political debate from 1945 to 1965, and within that setting Laski's political

philosophy was perceived as outdated and irrelevant, and occasionally denounced as positively subversive. With greater realism engendered by the political conflicts of recent years, his contributions have once more become pertinent as events have demonstrated the importance of the questions to which he addressed himself.

This study is an assessment of the meaning, relevance and validity of Laski's philosophy of democratic socialism. It is concerned with the merits and utility of Laski's contention that democratic socialism represents the best attainable form of polity in advanced capitalist society. The final chapter examines the merits of Laskian democratic socialism compared to the major alternative orientations of the contemporary Left in the capitalist democracies. As such, this study is both an historical and normative enterprise concerned with faithfully portraying Laski's views and assessing their current validity.

The second and third chapters set out Laski's case for a socialized democracy; they examine his contention that the ideals and values of liberal or progressive democrats of his day could not be realized without abolition or drastic limitation of the capitalist economic system. According to his early Fabian reasoning set out in the second chapter, progressive democracy required socialism in order to realize its political principles. In chapter three Laski's Depression case that without socialism democracy would probably perish in the decline of world capitalism is set out and examined. Both chapters end by assessing the contemporary bearing and validity of Laski's position.

The fourth chapter discusses Laski's views on why socialism ought to be democratic. It does not evaluate his systematic case be-

cause he never developed one. Rather it attempts in tracing the evolution of his views to highlight the ambiguities and tensions of his dual commitment. But due attention is paid to the consequences for his political theory and political activity of his failure to analyze systematically the relationships between democracy and socialism.

The final chapter, as previously indicated, takes up the contemporary relevance of Laski's position in relation to the major orientations on the Left today. It evaluates Laskian democratic socialism as an alternative methodology of social change to traditional Social Democracy, Authoritarian Leftism and the so-called New Left. In effect, this chapter extends Laski's arguments and puts them in the context of the political alignments and controversies of the present. It is not, however, an exercise in speculation as to what Laski might have said; rather it simply develops the present-day consequences of the kind of position which he held to in the political struggles of the earlier part of the century.

Most of the major concepts which are discussed in this study ought not to cause difficulties of understanding because their meaning should be clear from the context. But a certain ambiguity does inhere in one of the two key concepts of the study, and it is undoubtedly best to try to clarify how that concept is handled at the very start, lest the reader misunderstand the arguments presented. I refer to the concept "democracy", which is of course a notoriously ambiguous term and a very emotive one in political discussion as well. Unfortunately, in terms of simplicity, the term as used in the three major chapters of this study has a slightly different meaning in each. These meanings are not unrelated or necessarily contradictory, but each highlights

different aspects or phases of the democratic tradition and must be distinguished.

In the problems taken up in chapters 2, 3 and 4 Laski was addressing different constituencies and he emphasized various meanings or aspects of the democratic tradition. His arguments about socialism being necessary to realize democracy were addressed to the liberal or progressive democrats of the 1920's in Britain and the United States and can only be understood in terms of that context. When liberal or progressive democracy is mentioned in that chapter, that is the meaning intended; contemporary liberals are characterized by the term "elitist democrats".

Progressive democrats had a vision of democracy as a way of life. They took seriously the principles of political democracy, gave them an egalitarian slant, and were concerned about how they might be realized under the conditions of advanced capitalist society. Laski criticized them for their unwillingness to see that capitalism had to be transcended if their most cherished aims were to be achieved. In effect, the burden of his critique was that they had no adequate conception of means.²³

²³Some works outlining progressive democratic principles include the following: R. M. LaFollette, Autobiography (Madison, Wis.: LaFollette, 1913); Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Macmillan, 1922); T. V. Smith, The Democratic Way of Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926); John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (New York: Holt, 1927); A. D. Lindsay, The Essentials of Democracy (London: Humphrey Milford, 1929); and George S. Counts, The Prospects for American Democracy (New York: John Day, 1938). A good introduction is Daniel Aaron, Men of Good Hope (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961). C. Wright Mills develops a critique in White Collar (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 324-354.

In order to provide a brief summary of democratic progressivism, I have drawn on Charles E. Merriam, late Professor of Political Science in the University of Chicago. Merriam defined democracy as "a form of political association in which the general control and direction of the political policy of the commonwealth is habitually determined by the bulk of the population in accordance with appropriate understandings and procedures providing for popular participation and consent."²⁴

More importantly, Merriam set out what he considered the general principles or "assumptions" of progressive democrats:

1. The essential dignity of man, the importance of protecting and cultivating his personality on a fraternal rather than a differential principle, and the elimination of special privileges based upon unwarranted or exaggerated emphasis on the human differentials.
2. Confidence in a constant drive toward the perfectibility of mankind.
3. The assumption that the gains of commonwealths are essentially mass gains, and should be diffused as promptly as possible throughout the community without too great delay or too wide a spread in differentials.
4. The desirability of popular decision in the last analysis on basic questions of social direction and policy, and of recognized procedures for the expression of such decisions and their validation in policy.
5. Confidence in the possibility of conscious social change accomplished through the process of consent rather than by the methods of violence.²⁵

Laski argued that such aims demanded democratic socialism.

Laski's arguments in Chapter 3 are directed to progressive democrats, but they are also addressed to other kinds of democrats. Laski

²⁴Charles E. Merriam, The New Democracy and the New Despotism (New York: Whittlesey House, 1939), p. 11.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 11-12.

was arguing that conventional parliamentary democracy would give way to fascism or communism if democratic socialism were not implemented to solve the economic crisis of the Great Depression. In Chapter 3, the concept "democracy" is most frequently used to describe parliamentary democratic governments such as those of France, England and the United States.

In his arguments addressed to socialists which are taken up in the fourth chapter, "democracy" usually carries one or both of two meanings. It has reference either to socialist adherence to democratic procedures on the road to power, or to the necessity for such typical features of democratic government as civil liberties and constitutionalism in the socialist society of the future. As used in chapter 4, "democracy" means either the democratic class struggle by "ballots" or the need for freedom and limited government under socialism.

Having clarified this, let us turn to Laski's substantive arguments.

CHAPTER II

One of the major themes of Harold Laski's post-pluralist political philosophy was his frequently reiterated conviction that political democracy required socialism. His arguments on this can be divided into two categories: general and prudential. Although partly a matter of convenience, this distinction coincides nicely with the trend of Laski's political thought. General arguments about democracy needing socialism are to be found in his Fabian works of the 1920's, and prudential arguments about socialism as the answer to the challenge of fascism occur in the quasi-Marxian works of the 1930's. Both lines of argument converged on the conviction that either democracy would limit capitalism or capitalism would limit democracy. The present chapter examines Laski's general arguments, and the following chapter evaluates his prudential case.

Laski wanted to prove that political democracy as defined by liberal democrats committed to civil liberties, majority rule, political and legal equality, political participation and government by consent necessitated socialism under the social and economic conditions of advanced capitalist society. Liberals and progressives had attempted to realize their aims by formal grants of rights to the masses and occasionally by regulation of capitalism. Laski insisted that before any real improvement could be expected it would be necessary to nationalize a substantial part of the capitalist economic system, and undertake socialist measures designed to drastically limit inequalities

of income. He argued that liberal reforms had failed because they did not go far enough and were not based upon a recognition of the real structure of political power in the advanced capitalist societies. He also believed that democratic principles ought to be extended to economic institutions under the conditions of capitalist society.

The task of summarizing Laski's general case, however, presents problems. He never wrote a book or essay directly presenting his case. The theme pervades his works, but there is no systematic statement of his position. Therefore, it is necessary to abstract certain general arguments which frequently recur, and present the various supporting arguments and examples which occur in his various works. This means that his arguments are set out as synthesized and abstracted from a number of sources.

Various gaps and undeveloped connections in Laski's arguments will become apparent; indeed, there are inconsistencies between his formulations. The task of evaluation could not be limited to the final section of the chapter. I have frequently amended or tried to fill in or complete an argument, though I hope it is clear where the exposition of Laski stops and the commentary begins.

Laski's approach typically involved an argument that some cherished aim of progressive democrats could not be realized without much more drastic changes in the social system of capitalist society than reformist liberals had hitherto contemplated. He made a number of specific arguments about various aims which were not compatible with the continued existence of capitalism. In one case, his point was that the democratic principle held by progressives ought to be extended to industrial institutions and that this must, of necessity, mean the end

of capitalism.

1. Freedom of the press does not exist in capitalist society.

In line with progressive democratic thought, Laski envisaged the political arena in a democratic society as a "free market in ideas" involving active and continuous political participation so as to maintain popular control of government. The individual citizen should be a rational-activist capable of making decisions involving both substantive and functional rationality. In order that such a system can function, it is necessary that the individual citizen have access to reliable and relevant information. In a mass society that means reliable media; in Laski's time, the most important medium of public information was of course the press. Without such access, the public cannot make rational choices concerning alternative conceptions of the public good.

"The freedom of a people depends, to a degree we are only beginning to realize," Laski argued, "upon the quality of the news with which it is supplied."¹ The public must have access to adequate information if it is to perform its functions of choosing leaders and deciding between policies in such a way as to secure the general welfare. The control of the press and other media therefore becomes a matter of prime concern to progressive democrats concerned with the nature and quality of information available to the citizen.

Those who are to decide must be in a position to decide on the basis of the best information available. "Their judgment must not be thwarted by the presentation of a biased case...A policy may be

¹H. J. Laski, A Grammar of Politics (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925), p. 86.

represented as entirely good or bad by the skillful omission of relevant facts."² As far as the situation in the 1920's was concerned, Laski went so far as to say that it would not "be very wide of the mark to argue that much of what had been achieved by the art of education in the nineteenth century had been frustrated by the art of propaganda in the twentieth."³ Moreover, capitalist society had stimulated the creation of agencies devoted to the deliberate falsification of news. In Laski's view, the situation was such that Jefferson's comment that a people could not be both ignorant and free was pertinent.

Laski was quite clear that the media served other purposes than the provision of accurate information; that they were, in point of fact, agencies of indoctrination. Under such circumstances, the press could not perform the tasks assigned to it by democratic theory. Owned by the capitalists, operated as business enterprises, and dependent upon advertising revenues, the press did not serve democracy but rather the class aims of the ruling class. In the existing circumstances of near domination of the press by large capitalist papers (and fewer and fewer of those), Laski insisted that it had become "difficult for any observer...to see the facts through the clouds of bias, suggestion and suppression."⁴

Had Laski lived to see the depressing spectacle of Vietnam, he

²Ibid., p. 147.

³Ibid.

⁴H. J. Laski, The Dangers of Obedience (New York: Harper, 1930), pp. 222-223.

would have been confirmed in his conclusions. In the early 1960's only a few small magazines such as The Nation, The Progressive and I. F. Stone's Weekly made available accurate and relevant information of the sort every citizen should have had access to for rational foreign policy thinking. The great newspapers and mass circulation magazines supplied an incredible amount of misinformation and deception. Newspapers are still commercial enterprises, and in recent years economic circumstances have resulted in more and more concentration of ownership and fewer and fewer journals.⁵

2. Critical civic education does not exist in capitalist society.

Laski, in common with progressive democrats, assumed that effective mass political participation was necessary for effective democracy. Indeed, he defined "citizenship" as "the contribution of one's instructed judgment to the common good."⁶ He argued that this would have to mean educational opportunities for everyone designed to give the communication skills, informational background, and subjective confidence prerequisite to political efficacy. Without the provision of such critical civic education, he warned, the result could only be mass political apathy.⁷

Power in the modern world, Laski argued, would belong to those

⁵See George Seldes, Never Tired of Protesting (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1968); James Aronson, The Press and the Cold War (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); and James Aronson, Deadline for the Media (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972).

⁶Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 29.

⁷Ibid., pp. 18-19, 42-43, 327.

capable of formulating and communicating ideas. Those without such capacity would become the slaves of the others. He maintained that under capitalism there exist disparities in civic education which are not random between individuals but rather rest on systematic disparities between social classes. The children of the rich are educated to "habits of authority while the children of the poor are trained to habits of deference."⁸ A class trained to govern will exert its power; a class trained to deference will occupy an inferior position because it does not know how to articulate and realize its demands.

In Laski's opinion, both access and substance in education in capitalist society worked to the detriment of the many. The children of the wealthy learned how to govern; the children of the many were trained to take their place on the assembly line. He denied that capitalist society rewarded merit and that those who succeeded did so because of superior talent. He argued that capitalist society contained a reservoir of unused talent. Educational opportunity was limited by the economic position of the aspiring student.

In contemporary society, educational opportunities are democratized by comparison with Laski's England. In the United States, even university education is within the realm of possibility for the average working class child of some intelligence and ambition.

Nevertheless, it is problematic whether the situation has changed as much as appearances might indicate. Laski had a particular content of education in mind: a critical education in the skills and pre-requisites of effective citizenship. It would take an optimistic

⁸Ibid., p. 147.

observer to suggest that all the effort expended on education is designed to encourage critical thinking. Most political socialization revolves around inculcation of system supportive notions and standard bourgeois patriotism.⁹

Within political socialization as it exists, the kind of class differentiation criticized by Laski has not disappeared. Edgar Litt, in an empirical study of civic education in schools serving different social classes, found that the upper classes are still educated to govern and the working classes to make a peaceful and contented underlying population.¹⁰ Other observers have commented upon the importance of certain elite educational institutions mostly monopolized by the upper classes in terms of the socialization and recruitment of political leaders in the United States.¹¹

3. Political equality does not exist in capitalist society.

Progressive democrats have believed that political equality (including both formal equal rights and actual equality of power and influence) could be guaranteed by formal constitutional arrangements and

⁹See Fred Greenstein, Children and Politics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); R. D. Hess and J. Torney, The Development of Political Attitudes in Children (New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1967); and David Easton and Jack Dennis, Children in the Political System: The Origins of Political Legitimacy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969). Edgar Friedenbergs Coming of Age in America (New York: Vintage, 1965) is also relevant.

¹⁰Edgar Litt, "Civic Education, Community Norms and Political Indoctrination," in Edgar Litt, ed., The Political Imagination (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1966), pp. 486-494.

¹¹See C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 62-68; and G. William Domhoff, Who Rules America?, pp. 16-18.

various political devices. Politicians such as LaFollette and Norris campaigned for direct primaries, referenda, and recall elections to restore government by the people and curb business control of government. Laski argued, as did other Socialists, that genuine popular control of government with political equality could not be achieved in capitalist society.

In the absence of economic change, Laski argued, political power was bound to remain in the hands of those in possession of economic power. Though at the time of his Grammar he believed Marxism guilty of "an overemphasis of one link in the chain of causation,"¹² he agreed with the Marxists that political power ordinarily follows the distribution of economic power. That class which owns the means of production and distribution shapes the entire culture, including the ideas of the underlying population. In a society where money means power, expensive political campaigns requiring leisure from work to earn a living are the direct or indirect prerogative of the wealthy or those with access to their support. Then, too, direct economic pressure may sometimes be applied. American employers in 1896 and 1924 threatened to fire workers if candidates they opposed won or if it came to their attention that workers had voted for radical change. Henry Demarest Lloyd once pointed out that in the 1880's John D. Rockefeller did everything with the Pennsylvania Legislature except refine it.

In virtue of economic equality, men can exert unequal pressures upon the fabric of social institutions. Rather than a system of decision-making in which every man counted for one, capitalism had

¹²Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 162.

produced a system of decision-making in which most important decisions and non-decisions were made by an elite directly or indirectly made up of or controlled by the owners of the means of production and distribution.

Progressives had argued that the existence of democratic political procedures could be used as countervailing power against economic elites. Laski contended that in a democratic state characterized by great economic disparities, the many lack consciousness and organization. In his words,

They do not know the power that they possess... Any action by the working class, even in a democratic state, involves risk to their security out of all proportion to the certainty of gain. They have rarely in their hands the instruments necessary to secure their desires. They have seldom even learned how these may best be formulated and defended. They labor under the sense of inferiority which comes from perpetual obedience to orders... They tend to confound the institutions they have inherited with the inescapable foundations of society.¹³

Laski did not deny that the masses in a democracy were usually better off than under autocratic rule. He did not minimize either the reality of concessions or the institutions of power the many can and do develop, such as trade unions. But he insisted that political equality would not exist so long as the capitalist class was able to dominate society and politics in virtue of its possession of economic power.

Progressives had tried to reform capitalism and regulate business and its political activities. Laski predicted, and experience since his time has proved him right, that regulation would be ineffective in

¹³H. J. Laski, An Introduction to Politics (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), p. 16. First published in 1931.

depriving capitalists of effective control. In the United States, the regulated regulate the regulators.¹⁴

4. Legal Equality does not exist in capitalist society.

Legal equality was of course one of the key demands of the bourgeois revolutions. Progressives had come to define it as equal treatment of everyone before the law and just laws representing, in Jefferson's phrase, "equal rights for all; special privileges for none." Laski believed that such legal equality did not exist in capitalist society and could not be realized without the introduction of socialism.

Though he repudiated any suggestion of cynicism, Laski argued that where men's ability to exert pressure was unequal, the response to their claims would be unequal as well. He insisted that there were three types of bias built into the legal order under capitalism. The most basic involved the very laws constituting the legal order. Expounding the implications of an economic interpretation of politics, Laski called attention to the importance of the role of class in the law-making process. While not denying a desire on the part of the ruling class to be just, he pointed out that "men think differently who live differently; and in the approach to the problem of what legal imperatives are ultimately desirable...each class approaches the question with an unstated and half-conscious major premise at the back of its mind."¹⁵

Under capitalism, for example, the legal order reflects the needs

¹⁴See Grant McConnell, Private Power and American Democracy (New York: Knopf, 1966); and Robert Fellmeth, The Interstate Commerce Commission (New York: Grossman, 1970).

¹⁵H. J. Laski, An Introduction to Politics, p. 15.

and interests of those who control the means of production and distribution. Common interests exist, and laws are enacted occasionally which restrict the activities of so-called private enterprise. But, by and large, the laws reflect the functional imperatives of the capitalist system. The capitalist elite, like any other ruling class, identifies its conception of the good with the general welfare. This conception is, of course, partial to their interests and bound up with the preservation of their power.

Within the legal system, there exists a second sort of bias arising from the role and composition of the judiciary. With the legal realists, Laski insisted that the judge plays an active role in the administration of justice (and injustice). No system of laws interprets itself. Legal imperatives have to be interpreted, and those responsible for interpretation unavoidably exercise power. They are not passive servants of the written word. "To apply precedent and principle to new systems of fact is inevitably to extend their boundaries; and the men who interpret the meaning of clauses in a constitution or statute are, in truth, bound to be the masters of them."¹⁶

Laski put forward a number of key judicial decisions as evidence for his conclusion as to the partiality of the courts. He instanced judicial decisions everywhere concerning the development of trade unionism as clear evidence of class bias. He traced in detail the processes by which the British courts emasculated the Workmen's Compensation Act in defiance of the intent of Parliament, but in conformity with

¹⁶ H. J. Laski, Studies in Law and Politics (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), p. 202. First published in 1932.

their class prejudices and sympathies.¹⁷ American cases he found to be even more striking in their incidence and scope, reflecting the greater power of the judiciary in the American political system. Opponents of the existing economic system, on the other hand, nowhere fared well, even when acting peacefully and well within existing procedures.

The third sort of bias to be found in the legal order of the modern capitalist state involved access to legal processes of remedy. Laski pointed out that the unequal distribution of wealth made for unequal access to the courts. In his words,

The rich man can almost always afford bail; not so the poor. A fine means nothing to the rich...The rich man has at his disposal all the resources of legal technic; the poor man, for the most part, must either take what lawyer he can get or rely on the power of the judge to penetrate...his...inarticulateness... What we call embezzlement in a junior clerk becomes high finance in a millionaire. What is disorderly conduct in the East End of London becomes high spirits West of Temple Bar. What is theft in Poplar is kleptomania in Kensington. We have no conscience about the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti; but Mr. Thaw's millions enable him to escape their fate.¹⁸

The courts under capitalism function as a part of the total system. Though capitalist justice is undoubtedly not as blatantly partial as it once was the legal order of capitalist society remains biassed, and access to that legal system still depends to a considerable extent upon economic resources.¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 286-289.

¹⁸H. J. Laski, The Dangers of Obedience, p. 219.

¹⁹See E. H. Sutherland, White Collar Crime (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961); and Bruce Wasserstein and Mark J. Green, eds., With Justice For Some (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

5. Civil liberties are precarious under capitalism.

Progressive democrats have always been ardent civil libertarians. Laski believed that the inequality characteristic of capitalist society jeopardized the security of freedom. Both rulers and ruled have other things on their minds. The elite come to believe themselves to be superior people, and to view those outside the magic circle as inferiors whose subordination is a part of the natural order of things. They discover special virtues in themselves which make them alone fit to rule. Eventually, they come to believe that those deprived of a share in governing are fortunate to be free of the burdens and cares of political responsibility. Any demand by the underlying population for admission to full citizenship seems to them the very embodiment of evil. In the end, they will abandon liberty if it seems to threaten their privileges.

Laski also believed that the masses in an unequal society represent a threat to freedom. He thought that in desperation they are potential converts to irrational movements led by charismatic leaders. They are too ignorant to realize the fragility of civilization, and mobilization of the masses under such circumstances could not, in Laski's view, lead to a better social order.

Capitalist society (or any other society characterized by inequality) is unstable and hence makes freedom precarious because it must exist with the permanent threat of revolutionary overthrow. Laski noted that Aristotle had long ago singled out the craving for equality as one of the most important sources of political instability. In the modern world, no nation could survive the permanent division of its people into rich and poor. Legitimacy would be weak and there would be

the ever-present threat of revolution.

Civil liberties flourish in an atmosphere of security.²⁰ Freedom cannot survive in the politics of revolution. A society pervaded by inequality is bound to limit discussion in the interests of privilege. If its interests are threatened, the elite will abolish civil liberty. The powers that be are drawn to repression. But a successful revolutionary movement from below would not mean a flowering of civil liberty either. So the options for civil liberty presented by the politics of inequality are not bright.

Laski believed that civil liberty could survive only in a society where men are, broadly speaking, equally interested in its preservation. And men have an equal interest in freedom only when they have a roughly equal stake in its results. Where only a few are free, they seldom have the imagination or sympathy to realize the consequences of denial of freedom to others. They become more interested in the preservation of their privileges. Eventually, divergence of interest leads to conflict and conflict imperils freedom.

In effect, Laski was arguing that social solidarity in a free society becomes real only when most men in are approximately equal circumstances. If they have an equal interest, there is a greater chance that they will be concerned to participate in the process of decision-making. In the absence of equality, there is little motivation to redress others' grievances. "If our interest is unequal, our sense of a need to share with others in action will be small.

²⁰H. J. Laski, Liberty in the Modern State (London: Penguin, 1937), pp. 183-184. First published in 1930.

Other things will seem more significant or more urgent; and the need itself will shrink as it obtrudes."²¹ The less we have in common with our neighbors, the less we shall make of denial of their claims. Inequality makes for political apathy in regard to violations of civil liberty.

The fate of civil liberties in times of severe political conflict, the rise of irrational social movements such as Naziism, the phenomenon of Joe McCarthy and his imitators have provided abundant empirical evidence for Laski's conclusions. Civil liberties have fallen victim to elite repression, mass rejection in the interest of security, and mass apathy.²²

6. Democracy in capitalist society is narrowly political.

Progressive democrats envisaged their democratic principles as having implications for other than political institutions. They were often concerned with the extension of democracy in, for instance, educational institutions. Laski undertook to argue that economic institutions should be democratized and economic authority be made responsible to the consent of the governed.

Laski argued that business was a system of power and as such ought to be subject to popular control as should any other government.

²¹Ibid., p. 170.

²²See Zechariah Chafee, Jr Freedom of Speech in the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941); Frederick L. Schuman, The Nazi Dictatorship (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1935); and Murray Levin, Political Hysteria in America: The Democratic Capacity for Repression (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

For most people, he argued, private economic governments determine more aspects of their lives than the public institutions of capitalist society. Yet the latter alone are (partially) subject to democratic control. Democracy should be extended to industry. "We have given the people power in the realm of politics, and we are trying to pretend to ourselves that the equalization of authority therein implied may rightly cease at its boundaries."²³

Laski made three separate and distinct arguments in favor of his conclusion that economic power as private government ought to be democratized. He asserted that authority in the economic sphere as the exercise of power ought to be subject to the same checks and restraints as any other form of power and for pretty much the same reasons. In other words, the arguments for control of political power by the people were, in his opinion, valid in respect to economic power. Such power "must be subject to the rules of democratic governance" and there must be an end to "unfettered and irresponsible will in the industrial world."²⁴

Second, Laski argued that with economic government as with political government "when the experience associated with power is less than that of the adult population, the welfare secured almost always is less than that of the citizen-body."²⁵ Laski's case against government

²³Laski, The Dangers of Obedience, pp. 228-229.

²⁴Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 163.

²⁵Ibid., p. 93.

by the few is that the few identify their private good with the good of the community. Those excluded from control are deprived of benefit.

"Classes excluded from a share of power have always been classes excluded from a share of benefits."²⁶ The average citizen must have a right to participate in control of economic government to make sure it operates in the interest of the community.

Third, Laski argued that the political State could not achieve its aims unless private economic government were subjected to public and popular control. The aim of the State, he insists, is to "enable men, at least potentially, to realise the best that is in themselves."²⁷ It is an organization "for enabling the mass of men to realise social good on the largest possible scale."²⁸ If the state cannot create the good directly, it can provide the conditions of the creation of good.²⁹

If the purpose of the state is the good of the community, the State cannot tolerate a system of economic organization which does not contribute or, indeed, negates the general welfare. The processes of production and distribution must be organized to contribute to the general welfare if the purpose of the democratic state is to be achieved. Laski argued that the anarchy of capitalist production had to be ended and the economic system subordinated to social purpose. "Either the State must control industrial power in the interests of its citizens, or industrial power will control the State in the interest of

²⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

its possessors."³⁰

Private economic government in capitalist society is still only very imperfectly subject to public control, and there are many contemporary democratic theorists who echo Laski's concern.³¹

What remedy did Laski propose for the shortcomings of bourgeois democracy's attempt to mix democracy and capitalism? What sort of society did he envisage as capable of realizing the principles and values of progressive democracy? The answer of course involves Laski's vision of a socialist society. He went beyond the progressive democrats in arguing that their principles could not be realized without the transformation of advanced capitalist society into a democratic socialist system. This was a step some of the progressives later followed during the Great Depression.³²

What sort of socialism did Laski endorse? He did not go as far as total socialism involving the complete abolition of private property and absolute equality of income. He suggested measures which he thought would be enough to accomplish his aims, such as provision of a decent standard of living for everyone and abolition of the economic and political power of the capitalist class.

Laski wanted a "mixed economy" in which the major means of production and distribution would be nationalized. This would be done

³⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

³¹ See Peter Bachrach, The Theory of Democratic Elitism (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); and Gerry Hunnius, G. David Garson, and John Case, eds., Workers' Control (N.Y.: Random House, 1973).

³² See, e.g., John Dewey, Liberalism and Social Action (New York: Minton, Balch, 1935).

to give the government control over production in order to enforce a system of distribution designed to provide every citizen with a living giving him the prerequisites necessary for citizenship, and also to eliminate the power of the capitalists rooted in their domination of the economic system.

With the majority of smaller firms, Laski favored the encouragement of voluntary cooperatives. These would be subject to close state supervision in order to regulate labor standards and the quality of output. He recommended that minor enterprises producing luxury goods and non-essential services remain in private hands. There was no suggestion in his writings respecting communal ownership of personal property.³³

In line with his belief in the validity of the hypothesis of self-government as applied to industry, Laski envisaged a comprehensive system of worker participation. He did not exaggerate the amount of power likely to be at the disposal of the ordinary worker, but he did maintain that institutions could be developed which would offer the equivalent of constitutional government in industry. He thought it possible to involve the workers in making decisions respecting salaries, working conditions and hiring and firing. Usually, Laski was restrained in his expectations about participation, though it must be admitted that he occasionally talked as if he expected the workers to take over completely. Basically, he wanted a form of "co-determination".

Within the nationalized sector, Laski recommended a complex of industry-wide boards vested with full power to carry out decisions

³³Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 435ff.

consistent with broad directives approved by the national legislative assembly. These boards would be composed of representatives of the managers, the workers and the community. Below this level, there would be both district and individual Works Committees in the plants and offices making up the nationalized concern. Laski's ideas were greatly influenced by the British and German experiences with shop committees during the First World War.³⁴

Emphasizing the diversity of the types of firms in the non-nationalized sector, Laski was not dogmatic about the forms of participatory management. He suggested that for larger firms the model of the nationalized industries would be appropriate. Various types of cooperative arrangements might be experimented with in the smaller plants to gain experience with varied alternatives. There would of course be some difference from the nationalized sector firms in the absence of direct community representation.³⁵

Laski envisaged a major role for cooperatives in his socialized democracy. He felt that other forms of enterprise would do well to emulate the participatory aspects and cooperative spirit of such enterprises. It might be suggested that at heart Laski wanted to extend such opportunities for meaningful participation to all enterprises in the socialist economy.³⁶

³⁴Ibid., pp. 445-454.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 491-508.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 462-475.

In order to secure for every citizen the economic prerequisites of citizenship, Laski planned that his socialist society should guarantee the right to work. "The citizen has a right to work. He is born into a world where, if rationally organized, he can live only by the sweat of his brow. Society owes him the occasion to perform his function."³⁷ But a man also has the right to work at a decent wage. "By the work he performs he must be able to secure a return capable of purchasing the standard of living without which creative citizenship is impossible."³⁸ And the job must involve reasonable hours of labor which leave sufficient leisure for thought and civic action as key components of democratic citizenship.³⁹

Laski did not attempt to set out in advance standards of wages and hours. He noted that there could be no "fixity of amount" in regard to wages. The wages and hours would be relative to the state of production and the conditions of society. "The interpretation of 'reasonable' in the analysis of this right has no fixity about it; its content will depend upon the technique of production at any given time."⁴⁰

Laski did not envisage absolute equality of reward. Given scarcity of certain skills, low status and unwanted jobs, hazardous work and the difficulties of calculation of equivalent need, he believed that absolute equality of remuneration was out of the question. He

³⁷Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 106.

³⁸Ibid., p. 107.

³⁹Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 107, 111.

also felt that it would be necessary to preserve in the short run differences in technique of payment. What he wanted, however, was to abolish differentials important enough to make for differential access to political power.⁴¹

He never set out clear economic criteria for incomes. Laski's only specific proposal was a "common civic minimum" somewhat akin to a guaranteed annual wage. The general principle involved in his proposals he formulated as follows: "Distinctions of wealth or status must be distinctions to which all men can attain and they must be required by the common welfare."⁴² As a statement of intent, this means intent to provide equality of opportunity and to minimize economic differentials. In practice, he thought a first step would be to try to realize the principle that "the urgent claims of all must be met before we can meet the particular claims of some."⁴³ This would be the function of the common civic minimum.

Laski never spelled out the precise content of his "common civic minimum". It would be designed to admit of everyone "realizing the implications of personality". It would involve a "margin of sufficiency" designed to achieve "identity of response to primary needs."⁴⁴ Laski does give the concrete example that "one man is not entitled to a house of twenty rooms until all people are adequately housed."⁴⁵ Once

⁴¹Laski, A Grammar of Politics, pp. 110, 189-198.

⁴²Ibid., p. 157.

⁴³Ibid.; cf. p. 160.

⁴⁴Laski, Grammar, pp. 157, 160.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 114.

a common minimum of response to human needs was assured, Laski was willing to contemplate inequalities so long as they were not great enough to threaten political equality and could be justified by social utility.

In line with the nature of citizenship, every member of society has the right to such education as will fit him for the task of citizenship. Laski desired a comprehensive programme of mass education which would not involve class differentials in access and opportunity. He did not think that this implied an identical education for everyone: "it would be foolish waste to give an identical training to Meredith and Clerk-Maxwell."⁴⁶ But every citizen must have access to an education giving him an equal opportunity to perform the tasks of citizenship and realize his personality.

As Laski was greatly interested in the quality of education and equality of opportunity he made suggestions respecting the place of education in a socialist society. He wanted a system of universal education up to and including access to university of education which would be accessible to all rather than on a basis of ability to pay. He wanted everyone to have a liberal education background with a concentration on civics great enough to ensure some development of the ability to distinguish between appearance and reality. As immediate measures, he wanted to raise the school leaving age and provide better salaries in order to attract the most competent minds into teaching. He was interested in long-range programmes to guarantee leisure time so that people had time to think about community issues.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

⁴⁷ Laski, Liberty in the Modern State, pp. 163-168.

With respect to the legal system in his socialist society, Laski also had many recommendations. Basically, the shift to socialism would eliminate class bias in the legal order as a whole. But Laski made many suggestions designed both as transitional reforms and building blocks of a socialist legal order. Among his suggestions were public defender offices, legal aid for those unable to pay for it, calculation of fines in terms of ability to pay, restriction of jail sentences to more serious offences, and compensation for defendants wrongly brought before the courts.

Laski envisaged a thorough overhaul of the legal profession. He wanted to make it a genuine profession--with responsibility to the public rather than to wealthy clients. He wanted lawyers to be dedicated to public service rather than to the accumulation of wealth--something which perhaps explains some of his enthusiasm for the early New Deal in the United States. He advanced proposals to reform legal education, encourage law reform designed to modernize and standardize codes, and wanted to subsidize research into legal problems.⁴⁸

In concluding this sketch of Laski's vision of socialism, it is appropriate to say a few words about the press and other media. It is also true that that is all it is possible to say, since nowhere in Laski's writings is there a positive discussion of what ought to be done. Among his few suggestions were independent fact-finding agencies, specialized journals of opinion, and steps intended to professionalize the calling of journalism. In later years, he endorsed nationalization

⁴⁸Laski, A Grammar of Politics, pp. 564-572; cf. Studies in Law and Politics, pp. 291-295.

of the media, but nowhere in his writings does he explore that in detail or consider the problems which might arise.⁴⁹

II

The major thrust of Laski's Fabian political philosophy was a quest for a form of polity capable of realising progressive democratic ideals under the conditions of advanced industrial society. He argued that the means hitherto adopted by progressives--political reforms and regulatory legislation--were thoroughly inadequate in terms of their announced aims. He insisted that the political ideal of progressive democracy could not be realized without socialism.

Universal suffrage had proved in practice as disappointing as other nineteenth-century utopian remedies. Laski found the most fundamental reason for the failure of "the people" to profit from their apparent victory in the economic structure of the societies which had adopted liberal democracy. He argued that progressive democrats were justifiably disappointed with the results of parliamentary democracy. But he added that they could not expect to achieve anything substantial in the way of improvement so long as they continued to temporize on the issue of control of concentrated "private" economic power.

How is the contemporary political relevance and validity of Laski's critique of the shortcomings of democracy to be evaluated? From the standpoint of present-day "elitist democrats" Laski's critique is invalid because irrelevant. They long ago abandoned the progressive democratic political principles and values on which Laski's immanent critique of progressive democracy was based. Contemporary scholars are

⁴⁹Cf. Laski, Liberty in the Modern State, p. 162.

wasting time in terms of analyzing a presumed retreat from "classical democracy"; what really happened was a retreat from "progressive democracy" which was part and parcel of the political defeat of progressive democratic reform movements.⁵⁰

Senator Burton K. Wheeler put the American situation very neatly:

During World War II, the practice of pasting on political labels became ridiculous. To the 'liberals,' it didn't matter how reactionary you were on domestic issues. If you were an 'interventionist,' that is, pro-war, you were automatically welcomed with open arms as a 'liberal'.⁵¹

By the mid-1950's, anyone could be a "liberal democrat" by favoring investigation of Communism by the F.B.I. rather than Congress, and "elitist democrats" had reduced the concept of democracy to infrequent mass choices of a segment of the governing elite. The ideas of popular control of government, political debate over issues, and political equality defined as equality of power were dismissed as remnants of paranoid "populism" if not as downright subversive.⁵²

If, however, one retains allegiance to the principles of progressive democracy, Laski's critique of the shortcomings of bourgeois

⁵⁰ On the presumed retreat from "classical democracy", see Bachrach, The Theory of Democratic Elitism; and Charles McCoy and John Playford, eds., Apolitical Politics (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), pp. 159-230. On the defeat of progressivism, cf. Russel B. Nye, Midwestern Progressive Politics (New York: Harper, 1965), pp. 288-363; and Bruce Catton, The War Lords of Washington (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

⁵¹ Burton K. Wheeler, Yankee from the West (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 389.

⁵² See Edward Shils, The Torment of Secrecy (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956); and Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York: Random House, 1955).

democracy retains its relevance and validity. Democracy and capitalism are both systems of power in advanced capitalist society, but, by and large, the imperatives of the latter system have prevailed. In shaping public opinion and moulding legislation, those in control of the economic system have had all the advantages. The pattern of concentration of wealth and power at the top combined with concessions to the bottom has made for remarkable stability in advanced capitalist society, but has done little toward the realization of progressive democratic ideals.

Laski's critique of capitalist democracy, or the coexistence of democracy and capitalism, is perhaps best evaluated by breaking it down into classes. His claims that political and legal equality do not exist in capitalist society are unquestionably valid, and I would argue that they cannot. Laski's claims that a genuinely free media and critical civic education do not exist are arguable, but open to the objection that such things might be. The claim that civil liberties are precarious in capitalist democracy is unquestionably valid, but the critique of limitation of democracy in capitalist society to political institutions raises troublesome issues. In sum, I view points 3, 4 and 5 as valid; 1 and 2 as conditionally valid, and point 6 as problematic.

Political equality as equality of power and influence simply cannot be reconciled with the existence of private ownership of the means of production and distribution under monopoly capitalism. The political resources at the service of the ruling class are such that any battles won by the underlying population are in the nature of concessions wrung by threat of willingness to cause trouble. Even where temporary successes are achieved, the imbalance of power is such that over time the

victories go to the status quo. The fate of regulatory legislation is perhaps a prime example of the inferior status of the unorganized public interest.

In a society where political power follows the distribution of economic power, and capitalists possess the latter, the legal order will of necessity reflect the imperatives of business enterprise and its culture. The legal order will be class biased in the interest of the upper classes. Within that order, status will create privilege and wealth opportunity to escape justice. The resources of legal talent available to the rich enable them to escape the normal consequence of the legal order of the capitalist system. It is unlikely that class bias in the administration can be abolished without abolishing classes. If one is committed to legal equality in the senses accepted by progressive democrats, one must perforce be committed to a classless society.

Dedication to civil liberties is one of the most distinctive commitments of progressive democrats. Laski produced a sophisticated analysis--later elaborated into a full-blown analysis of the consensual foundations of the democratic state--of how precarious civil liberties must be in a society suffering from tensions and strain arising from manifest and latent class conflict. Laski was very sensitive to both the elitist temptation toward repression and the mass receptivity to irrational mass movements capitalizing on fear and despair in crisis situations. A phenomenon such as McCarthyism would not have surprised Laski in the least.

The contentions regarding the media and critical civic education must be assigned only conditional validity. It is not an unthinkable or entirely improbable projection to anticipate the possibility of sub-

stantial improvement in these categories within the framework of capitalist democracy. It would be dogmatism to insist that substantial improvements could not take place without the abolition of capitalism. This is not to say that such developments are to be expected, but that they are conceivable. A Laskian answer can be put in Douglas Dowd's words: "The easy answer that the market system can handle these matters is made doubtful by pointing out that it hasn't."⁵³

Laski's most problematic contention is his critique of the narrowly political quality of democracy in capitalist society. It is not so much that there is anything wrong with the idea of extending democratic relationships to other than political institutions. The problem is that Laski's discussion of the issue is lacking in precision. As noted, his comments range from implying substantial producer control to cautionary comments on the limited control which could be expected.

He noted that economic imperatives limited freedom in the factory: "A man is entitled to be original about his politics or his religion; he is not entitled to be original when he is working with others, say, in a nitro-glycerine factory."⁵⁴ Yet at other times he almost implies producer domination of the plant. He seems to have intended participatory sharing or limitation of managerial authority rather than the abolition

⁵³Douglas Dowd, Thorstein Veblen (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 139.

⁵⁴Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 148.

of hierarchy.

But he really never made it clear exactly how much voice the workers might be expected to have. The kind of subordination of individual negotiations to parliamentary guidelines he anticipated would leave little scope for wage bargaining at the level of the individual firm or industry. He identified all the problems but proclaimed the need for (without making concrete suggestions) some form of compromise between the extreme possibilities.

Laski's compromise form of participation raises difficulties because while too structured to have much effect on worker's feelings of political efficacy, it involved enough decentralization to necessitate creation of a vast system of bureaucratic bodies with overlapping powers and responsibilities.

It is true that a democratic political system requires a democratic political culture. But specialized social institutions require hierarchy for coordination of expertise and complex divisions of labor. This is not to deny the need for participation, but to suggest that it is no panacea for alienation or apathy. It is true, however, that a strong case for worker control can be made on the ground that it is necessary in order to guarantee a say and prevent bureaucratic degeneration in the socialist state.⁵⁵

But given the validity of Laski's critique of capitalist democracy from the point of view of progressive democracy, what can be said of his proposed solution. I do not think that there is any point

⁵⁵See Barrington Moore, Jr. Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery, pp. 66-69.

at this late date of a sustained rejoinder to those who believe that any kind of socialism must result in dictatorship and tyranny. Von Hayek has been refuted by experience.⁵⁶ But what would Laskian socialism accomplish?

Laski's comprehensive solution for the problems which he had identified involved the gradual transformation of capitalist society into a collectivist democracy by way of a programme of evolutionary socialism. He demanded government ownership of the major means of production and distribution, relative equalization of incomes, and the development of a welfare state which would guarantee to all citizens a common "civic minimum". These measures were advanced as intrinsically desirable and as means for the realization of progressive democratic principles and values.

In the final analysis, Laski believed that democracy would limit capitalism or capitalism would limit the realization of progressive democracy. His suggested measures were designed to limit (with a view to ultimate abolition) the economic and political power of the capitalist class. His shorthand term for this transformation was "equality". Given the experience of Russia, he believed that this must be accomplished gradually since "men will sooner part with their souls than their possessions."⁵⁷

Would Laski's socialist society realize the ideals of progressive democracy? I would argue that if they cannot be realized under the

⁵⁶ But see the devastating critique of Hayek by Herman Finer, The Road to Reaction (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945).

⁵⁷ Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 87.

favorable circumstances which would exist in the kind of collectivist democracy Laski envisaged, then it is an inescapable conclusion that they cannot be realized under the conditions of advanced industrial society. Laski's socialist state would give the people all the advantages over against the vested interests. If under such circumstances the people were too apathetic or incompetent to achieve popular control of government, it would be necessary to abandon hope for progressive democracy and search for a benevolent and disinterested elite.

Laski's critique of capitalist democracy is both relevant and irrelevant. If one is interested in achieving progressive democratic aims in advanced capitalist society, his case is as cogent and penetrating as it ever was. Anyone seriously interested in progressive democracy must come to terms with the devastating case Laski made against its compatibility with the continued existence of the capitalist economic system.

But in another sense Laski's case is irrelevant. For the main drift of contemporary liberalism has abandoned any serious concern with realizing progressive democracy. For socialists to argue that socialism means the realization of democracy under present circumstances implies a prior effort to resurrect the progressive vision of democracy. Socialism is certainly not necessary in order to achieve the minimal aims of contemporary elitist democrats.

CHAPTER III

The fall of the British Labour Government in 1931 had a lasting impact on Harold Laski, and caused significant changes in his political philosophy. He abandoned "pluralism" and his writings began to take on decidedly Marxian overtones. The defection of J. Ramsay Macdonald and his colleagues from the Labour Party convinced him that there were serious obstacles in the way of any easy, peaceful and constitutional transition to socialism. At the same time, the developing economic crisis and the growing challenge of fascism made comprehensive socialization imperative.

Laski abandoned neither his liberal values nor his preference for democratic solutions. He adopted none of the "lines" of the organized left parties wholesale. With the significant but temporary exception of the Communist analysis of fascism, Laski began to use Marxian concepts in order to develop his own unique model of the crisis afflicting the Western democracies. Eventually, he followed this with his own model of fascism. His attention was focused upon the problem of achieving fundamental social change by democratic means. Without serious reforms, he was afraid that democracy would perish in the decline of world capitalism. Without socialism, he came to believe, the capitalist democracies were doomed. And yet, even if a socialist or reformist government were elected, there remained the question of whether the ruling class would acquiesce in the socialization of the capitalist system.

I

Democracy in Crisis, 1931-1939

Laski's basic paradigm of the crisis confronting the Western democracies was set out near the beginning of the period under discussion. With changes in detail reflecting the shifting alignments of party and world politics, he put forward in the 1930's a few basic themes relating to the prospects of parliamentary democracy. His emphasis shifted from socialism as the means of realizing the values of liberal democracy to democratic socialism as the only possible means of the survival of the existing parliamentary democracies. Even his historical and philosophical writings of this period were organized around the paradigm of the crisis of democracy.¹

The starting point of Laski's analysis was the growing insecurity of representative government. He noted with dismay the rise of dictators--claiming to know the "real" will of their peoples--and the decline of religious and political toleration. Victorian optimism had not survived the World War, and had been succeeded by general pessimism and disillusionment about progress. Few of the standard remedies such as more education, better experts or proportional representation seemed in the least adequate to cope with the political problems posed by the capitalist crisis.

Laski traced the origins of the crisis of democracy to the decline of consensus respecting the ends of the state. In the past, democracy

¹Yet this very relevance which contributed to Laski's popularity in the Depression years has reinforced his neglect in our day. The topicality of his books has enabled recent writers to dismiss them as obviously irrelevant and out-of-date.

had been successful because of substantial underlying consensus, and because it had become associated with the material progress and rising standard of living characteristic of capitalism in its period of expansion. In addition, it had been called upon to deal only with relatively uncomplicated problems admitting of fairly easy solutions. Most importantly, the major political parties had been substantially in agreement on fundamentals. "After the triumph of free trade, there was hardly a measure carried to the statute-books by one government which could not have been put there by its rivals."²

Democracies, Laski argued, are most successful when they have to deal with minor disagreements. Men are most willing to acquiesce in electoral defeat or unwelcome legislation when they do not concern issues deemed deeply significant. When disagreements arise about basic or fundamental issues, agreement about procedure tends to evaporate if one party feels threatened by the probable outcome of using existing procedures. Laski felt that economic crisis was causing policy disagreements serious enough to conceivably break down hitherto firm commitments to democratic solutions.

In fact, Laski noted, the consensus underlying liberal democracy had been problematic ever since the emergence of socialist political parties declining to accept the existing economic system as beyond dispute. The expansion of capitalism was accomplished in alliance with the working class, and the price of that alliance had been universal suffrage. The middle class had been willing to pay that price so long

²H. J. Laski, Democracy in Crisis (London: Allen and Unwin, 1933), p. 33.

as democracy had not threatened their social and economic privileges. And as long as capitalism's period of expansion had continued, they had been able to make continual concessions without undermining the foundations of their power.

With the intensification of the economic crisis, however, representative government was in danger because of the growing disagreements among social classes as to the end of the state. When society is expanding economically, there is little problem about such agreement. In a period of contraction, it becomes difficult for the ruling class to continue concessions. Laski believed that the Western liberal democratic political systems had reached such an impasse. The reforms demanded by the masses threatened economic privilege; the methods of recovery favored by the ruling classes involved deflation which would likely exacerbate working class discontent.³

As the Depression worsened, Laski noted that the ruling classes had responded by trying to shift most of the burden of economy on to the working class. When threatened by proposed reforms, they had not hesitated to subvert democratic government. He pointed to a wide range of cases, from undermining cabinet government in Great Britain to outright fascism in Germany, Austria and Spain, with the frustration of majority rule by the judiciary in the United States as an intermediate situation.⁴

³H. J. Laski, "Freedom in Danger," Yale Review, n.s. XXIII, (March, 1934), 534-551; "The Challenge of Our Times," The American Scholar, VIII, (Autumn, 1939), 387-399.

⁴H. J. Laski, The Rise of European Liberalism (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), pp. 159-163. First published in 1936.

The economic crisis had drastically limited the alternatives available to the ruling class. "The governing class, in a capitalist democracy...has the simple alternative of fighting for its position of privilege or of showing itself able consistently to improve the standard of life."⁵ Capitalism could retain the allegiance of the common man only by proving itself capable of indefinite expansion. Yet the Depression was evidence of its patent inability to do any such thing, and hence support for capitalism was clearly on the wane. With the worsening of economic conditions, working class discontent and socialist sentiment had both grown apace. Unfortunately, so had support for totalitarian social movements.

Laski argued from the premise common among Marxists in the 1930's that the Depression represented the final crisis of capitalism anticipated by Marx. On this view, capitalism had lost its capacity to expand, and was being destroyed by its internal contradictions. Under the circumstances, only some form of planned economy could restore production and put men back to work. Socialism, Laski argued, was the desirable solution because it would solve the economic problem in the interests of the masses.

He explained the failure of liberalism and the liberal parties in terms of their continued adherence to capitalism. They did not understand that it had lost its ability to recover. In effect, they were unaware that economic evolution had undermined both their economic ideology and their political base. There was the danger, however, that the government might perish in the inevitable rejection of capitalism

⁵Laski, Democracy in Crisis, p. 226.

as an economic system. Laski was concerned that liberal principles such as toleration and freedom of speech, and the institutions of parliamentary democracy, might be lost through identification with the existing economic system. Already, many were condemning civil liberties as a "bourgeois fetish".⁶

Laski argued that liberal democrats should reconsider their adherence to capitalism, and re-state their doctrine in terms appropriate to a context of equality. They should support democratic socialism, which could prevent the collapse of democratic government from failure to cope with the economic crisis. More than that, democratic socialism would extend the benefits of liberal democracy to the many in modern society. "The liberal ideal secured to the middle class its full share of privilege, while it left the proletariat in their chains. The effort of socialism is towards the correction of this inadequacy."⁷

But with the rise of socialist sentiment, there is the danger that the ruling class will attempt to strike back. In general, Laski felt that they had the choice of fighting or of trying to salvage what they could from a peaceful experiment in democratic socialism. As a political theorist, he was aware of multiple empirical possibilities. He was numerous reasons why the ruling class might choose to fight, though he hoped it would not come to that in Britain or the United States. He saw four major possibilities: capitalist counter-revolution,

⁶See H. J. Laski, The State in Theory and Practice (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), passim; and The Decline of Liberalism (London: Humphrey Milford, 1940), pp. 3-24.

⁷Laski, The Rise of European Liberalism, p. 155.

capitalist sabotage of ineffective reformist government, proletarian revolution, and his preferred option of peaceful transition to socialism.⁸

Laski was aware of the differences between those countries possessing and those lacking established democratic institutions. He gave great weight to the importance of national traditions in political behavior. In an article on the future of democracy, he listed thirteen advantages possessed by those nations with long experience of democratic government. Included were such benefits as typically higher standards of living, relatively weak military establishments, widespread desire for and expectation of political compromise, and the existence of large uncommitted "middle" blocs of opinion.⁹

Nevertheless, he rejected any easy optimism or complacency. No other political situation offered such advantages, it was true, but the question was precisely whether under conditions of crisis those advantages would be appreciated. Laski did not believe that the victory of democratic socialism was inevitable; he saw it as the most desirable solution to the political and economic crisis of the existing order. He did not believe in the possibility of successful proletarian revolution, and saw fascism as the likely outcome of any contest of arms. As he saw it, capitalism would be abolished peacefully of the ruling class would abolish democracy.

⁸Laski, Democracy in Crisis, pp. 233-263.

⁹H. J. Laski, "What is Vital in Democracy?" Survey Graphic, XXIV, (April, 1935), 179-180, 204-205.

II

"War by Revolution", 1939-43

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Laski put forward additional arguments for the pragmatic necessity of socialism in order to preserve democratic government. In his view, the prospects of parliamentary democracy were dim should the Allies be defeated, and the war could not be won without the introduction of socialism. From the first, he rejected the post Hitler-Stalin Pact Communist assertion that the war was an "imperialist" conflict of no substantial concern to the working classes. In speeches and in print, he demolished the Communist case and argued that only a victory of the Allied democracies could preserve civilization. There were many injustices in the capitalist democracies, he acknowledged, but "there is nothing so ugly, so evil or so unjust as the basic principles upon which the dictatorial systems are built."¹⁰

Yet the war could not be won without great sacrifices; and to call forth the efforts required, he argued, soldiers and workers must know that they are fighting for a future of social justice. Only with a promise of a better post-war world could the conquered peoples be expected to work for the overthrow of fascism. The future of the Allied cause, Laski believed, rested with the possibility of a European revolution.

In effect, Laski argued the necessity of an ideological war. Only a crusade for democracy and socialism, he argued, could enlist the full

¹⁰H. J. Laski, "The Need for a European Revolution," Programme for Victory, ed. by H. J. Laski (London: Routledge, 1941), p. 4.

energies of the masses in the struggle against fascism. Rhetoric alone could not succeed--only tangible performance would inspire and sustain the will to fight. There must be an ideological offensive parallel with the military aspect of the war effort. What better way to validate Allied claims to be fighting for democracy than the immediate inauguration of reforms in wartime? The only way to win the war was to make an Allied victory seem the one possible road to a better way of life.

Laski believed that the place to begin was the transformation of wartime Britain into a more equal and just society by introduction of substantial socialist reforms. This would not only strengthen the war effort, but "as knowledge of it permeates the countries now under the fascist yoke, it will light flames that no terrorism will be able to quench."¹¹ Wartime reforms would bolster the war effort, and at the same time lay the foundations of a better society after victory. Laski felt that victory was impossible if sought on the basis of a return to pre-war conditions.

Laski did not believe that a purely military victory over the fascist powers was impossible. According to Kingsley Martin, he never doubted that the Allies would win the war on that level.¹² He did argue that such a narrowly military triumph would solve none of the problems which had caused the war. Admitting that many felt that the overthrow of fascism was a sufficient war aim, he insisted that such a point of

¹¹H. J. Laski, Where Do We Go From Here? (New York: The Viking Press, 1940), p. 131.

¹²Martin, Harold Laski, p. 118.

view neglected the underlying crisis of capitalist civilization which had permitted the emergence of fascism in the first place.

Merely to defeat the enemy on the battlefield would solve neither the problem of mass unemployment nor the struggle for markets and resources among the major powers. It would do nothing to liberate the forces of production, prevent intensification of class struggles, or curb so-called national sovereignty. Yet without removal of the root causes of fascism, "men like Hitler and Mussolini are bound to rise again because all the conditions will still be present that evoke them."¹³ Without socialism, social injustice and international rivalry would frustrate any hopes for a better post-war world.

Laski felt that the war represented opportunity as well as danger. For modern war, he pointed out, is revolutionary in its effects. It shatters old institutions and compels innovation by the pressure of its demands. If the chance for social reorganization were seized, he maintained, it could lead to the emergence of new social forces and a peaceful, democratic post-war world. Under the circumstances, liberal democrats and socialists should press for extension and expansion of war-time social controls and planning. With a democratic Britain aligned with a New Deal America and the Soviet Union, "the defeat of Hitlerite Germany...would be the signal for the release of renovating and revolutionary forces...able to take a great step forward in the emancipation of mankind from the tyranny of things."¹⁴

¹³Laski, "The Need for a European Revolution," p. 5.

¹⁴H. J. Laski, The Strategy of Freedom (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942), p. 35.

He had supported the initial participation of the Labor Party in the Churchill government, but Laski came to criticize the Party for its acceptance of the "electoral truce". In his view, the Labor Party failed miserably to press their advantages in wartime for putting forward extensive plans for reform. The Attlee leadership, he believed, was failing to make Labor participation contingent on basic social change; indeed, they were not even willing to criticize Tory conduct of the war.

To Laski, this failure was the inevitable result of the failure of the leadership to build its philosophy of action upon Marxian insights. This situation resulted in the assumption that the state-power could be assumed to be neutral. In consequence, the Labor Party had accepted coalition on Tory terms under the supposed neutral imperative of "national unity". The trade unions were striving for nothing more than a junior partnership in a rapidly developing monopoly capitalism. The entire Labor movement had accepted a static conception of the war.

Laski felt that Labor understood the dynamic of the war no better than did Winston Churchill, for whom:

The war...is no more than a new phase in the secular struggle for world supremacy; Hitler, however evil, is merely one more figure in the long procession of tyrants whose march to power Britain has checked in each century since the Spanish Armada.¹⁵

Churchill saw fascism as simply one more threat to the balance of power; Laski interpreted it as an inevitable consequence of capitalism in decay. He argued that to lump the fascist dictators with the monarchs and Napoleons of the past was ahistorical. Such an approach neglected the

¹⁵H. J. Laski, Marx and Today (London: Gollancz and the Fabian Society, 1943), p. 12.

ways in which fascism had emerged and flourished with the support (or acquiescence) of world capitalism. Laski was depressed by the failure of the Labor leadership to comprehend this any better than Churchill.

Laski made changes in his theory of fascism as he watched the growing threat of Naziism. In the beginning, in common with others influenced by Marxism, he explained it as quasi-military dictatorship, designed to repress the political power of the working classes. The ruling class, threatened by deflation, had called in the army in order to restore capitalist hegemony. As he put it in a characteristic formulation of the mid-1930's, "The problems of capitalist democracy are solved by eliminating the democratic element in that union."¹⁶

By 1940, he had developed a more profound analysis. His starting point remained the opportunities generated by the crisis of world capitalism. But he acknowledged that fascism represented a genuine mass movement, and went so far as to concede that the old capitalist and military elites did not pull all the strings. Indeed, he admitted that the fascists had reduced them to subordinate status, had seized total control, and were concerned only with the perpetuation of their own power. Hitler and Mussolini, he suggested, controlled big business hardly less than they did the working classes. Laski began to develop a new model of fascism as an anti-intellectual, nationalist mercantilism.¹⁷

¹⁶ Laski, The State in Theory and Practice, p. 113.

¹⁷ Laski, Where Do We Go From Here?, pp. 76-128.

III

"Revolution by Consent", 1943-50

Laski's final position on why liberal democracy requires socialism was to a great extent a synthesis of his previous reasoning. But in drawing upon both his theoretical models and historical studies, it was put forward in a very systematic fashion as a substantive philosophy of history. The central theme was of course the rise and decline of world capitalism. On the positive side, he traced the emergence of socialism--both in its Soviet form, and in the Western form based upon non-violence and the protection of liberty which he so ardently desired.

He believed the contemporary period to be an "age of transition" from one social system to another, paralleling such epochs as the rise of Christianity, the Reformation, and the period of the French Revolution. The Second World War was only part of a continuing world revolution. This revolution, in his opinion, involved rising expectations and demands by the common people all over the world. The question was whether those demands would be met by force or peaceful surrender; that is, by counter-revolution or "revolution by consent". He hoped for the latter, but feared the former, of which fascism was only one manifestation.

"As always in a period of revolution, the drive to fundamental change is accompanied by disintegration and conflict."¹⁸ Though Laski

¹⁸ H. J. Laski, Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943), p. 9.

had great faith in mankind, he did not minimize the possibilities of a retreat to barbarism. He was no believer in automatic progress or the inevitable victory of anybody. But there was opportunity as well as danger--if men could understand and act on the imperatives of the age. There was social conflict, a decline of religion, breakdown in the rule of law, and other distressing features associated with the decline of capitalism. But men could plan for freedom.

To Laski, the key was recovery of consensus in society. He felt that the war had shown the high level men could reach when united in the service of a common ideal. Fraternity gives strength and "each of us is the stronger the deeper the solidarity of the society to which we belong."¹⁹ He believed the most pressing need to be the recovery of a coherent system of values, that is, a common faith. Rejecting the possibility of a revival of supernatural theology, he put forward socialism as a secular faith capable of restoring a semblance of social cohesion.

Only socialism, he believed, could provide a new social faith adequate to the challenge of the world revolution. Laski looked to Soviet Russia or to what he called "the Soviet idea" for suggestions as to the kind of social purpose needed to build a better world. Like many social scientists in the 1930's, he was interested in what was regarded as the planned social solidarity of the Soviet Union. The main principle of the Soviet experiment was supposed to be the satisfaction of mass demand. While criticizing the "ugly Byzantinism of its party

¹⁹ H. J. Laski, Faith, Reason and Civilization (New York: The Viking Press, 1944), p. 11.

infallibility," Laski regarded Russia as a new civilization which had brought to its citizens "more opportunity for self-fulfilment than anywhere else in the world."²⁰

Laski thought he saw in the U.S.S.R. at least the partial realization of the ideal of socialism. Production was for use and not for profit, with attention to social need rather than effective demand. There was no unemployment, and no frustration of technology in the service of planned scarcity undertaken in order to increase profits. He also believed the Soviets to have introduced a semblance of "economic democracy" throughout their economic system. "The rules of an enterprise are not made at the discretion of an employer who owns it...The rules are genuinely the outcome of a real discussion in which men and management participate."²¹

Nevertheless, Laski did not give a blanket endorsement to the Stalin regime; rather he tried to explain its dictatorial features as the inevitable outcome of certain peculiar historical circumstances. While critical of the regime for its failure to broaden its base and extend freedom, he argued that there were mitigating circumstances. Among them he listed the general backwardness of the country, internal subversive elements, the disorganization resulting from the revolution, and the implacable hostility of the capitalist world. He did not believe that the dictatorship would wither away until the regime felt secure. He believed that the victory of democratic socialism in the Western nations could provide the kind of security necessary to encourage

²⁰ Ibid., p. 57.

²¹ Laski, Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, p. 50.

democratization.²²

For Laski's hope was not that the West would embrace the Soviet model of socialism, but that democratic socialism would come to power in the advanced industrial societies of the West. He believed that democratic socialism would preserve traditional freedoms while solving the contradiction between the forces and relations of production characteristic of capitalism in decay.* Laski did not believe that the Russian Revolution offered a paradigm of universal applicability. He was a severe critic of Communist methods and particularly ridiculed the orthodox Communist assumption that they had the infallible recipe for socialism; indeed, he accused them of interpreting Marx "in a narrow and dogmatically rigid way."²³

Concerning the post-war world, Laski's philosophy of history and his prudential assessments converged on the conclusion that democratic socialism was the only hope for civilization. Without the abolition of capitalism, the contradictions of the market economy would result in mass unemployment once more. This would be fatal to democracy. Either the capitalists would repress freedom as the price of retaining state power, or the masses would in desperation embrace totalitarianism--

²²Ibid., pp. 68-75, 83-84.

* Laski frequently used Marxian economic rhetoric, but none of his works contain a sustained economic analysis of capitalism or evaluation of Marxian economics. In the 1930's, he took over Marxian forms of expression almost as common-sense terms.

²³ H. J. Laski, The Secret Battalion (London: Labour Publications Dept., 1946); see also Karl Marx and F. Engels, The Communist Manifesto, ed. by H. J. Laski (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 81-89, 91-95. The latter first appeared in 1948.

communist or fascist.²⁴

Likewise, it appeared to him that without the triumph of socialism in the West the Grand Alliance would be succeeded by renewed international rivalry, with the risk of future wars. Only socialism could solve the economic problems underlying international conflict. In addition, only Western socialism might be able to bridge the growing hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union. In particular, Laski hoped that British Labor might be able to reassure the Soviets, and increase the chances for both peace and democratization in the U.S.S.R. by moderating their fears.

Laski's last books and articles were concerned with the prospects for peace and freedom of the developing bi-polar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. His major treatise on the United States put forward an American labor party committed to substantial socialism as an alternative to a strategy of unthinking hostility to world revolution. He predicted disaster if the United States tried to maintain the status quo against the trend of history away from capitalism. In his Sidney Hillman lectures, he criticized the Western trade unions for accommodation to monopoly capitalism, arguing that more was needed than sterile economism to meet the challenges of the atomic age.²⁵

In a manuscript published only after his death, Laski tried to rethink once more his position on socialism and freedom. While stressing the hostility of the West toward Russia after 1917, he admitted that the

²⁴H. J. Laski, Will the Peace Last? (London: National Peace Council, 1944), p. 12.

²⁵H. J. Laski, The American Democracy (New York: The Viking Press, 1948); Trade Unions in the New Society (New York: The Viking Press, 1949).

fundamental responsibility for the Cold War had to be put on the Soviet Union. He was severely critical of the denial of intellectual and artistic freedom in post-war Russia. While critical of the increasingly repressive atmosphere in the United States, he conceded that Americans still enjoyed comparative freedom. At the end, his mood was depressed, but still hopeful that human ingenuity might find a way out.²⁶

IV

In his earlier writings, Laski's arguments about why liberal democracy required socialism were designed to show that the key ideals and values of liberal democracy were impossible of realization without substantial modification of the capitalist system. In the years of the Great Depression and the Second World War, he developed another sort of case for democratic socialism. He continued to maintain that democratic socialism was the best attainable form of polity, but his arguments became much more prudential and contextual.

The central contention of his later case was the assertion that without socialism the existing capitalist democracies were doomed. From this was derived the practical argument that the only way to preserve liberal democratic values amidst the decline of capitalism was to support what he eventually came to call "revolution by consent". Since he believed the recovery of capitalism to be impossible, he felt that the effective choices had been narrowed to democratic socialism or some form of totalitarianism--communist or fascist. Laski's writings and his many political activities were designed to support the democratic socialist alternative to totalitarian collectivism.

²⁶H. J. Laski, The Dilemma of Our Times (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952).

Laski's prudential case involved conditional arguments that under certain probable conditions it would be impossible for the capitalist democracies to survive without socialism. Yet his reputation has never really recovered from the disconfirmation of many of his prophecies. Even more than the Cold War, the neglect of his work in recent years may be attributed to the failure of events to corroborate many of his key expectations. That is to say, although his arguments were advanced conditionally, and with full awareness of--not to say insistence on--alternative options, the failure of events to develop in some of the directions he anticipated discredited Laski as a political analyst.

He has been interpreted as a doctrinaire, a dogmatist.²⁷ This is ironic in that his genuine contribution to political theory was his attempt to integrate Marxian insights into an empirical political analysis which could do justice to the complexities of the politics of capitalist democracy. But his predictions were premised on the assumption that capitalism could not recover and hence were falsified by events. The conditional quality of his arguments, his sense of multiple possibilities and the context of his discussion are neglected in order to fault his prophetic ability.

Laski was a doctrinaire neither in his theoretical work nor in his practical political activity. From the first he was sympathetic to the New Deal in the United States, though he argued that the logic of events would compel the Roosevelt Administration to take more and more drastic steps to control business enterprise. At no point did he succumb to the rigidities of Marxian scholasticism; he argued for

²⁷H. A. Deane, The Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski, *passim*.

his ideas on the basis of empirical evidence, not in terms of quotations from the writings of Marx or Lenin--let alone Stalin!

If in later years, scholars have found it difficult to understand his frequently apocalyptic tone, it is because they have forgotten the context of his work. Memories of the Great Depression have faded, fascism was defeated on the battlefield, and the postwar prosperity removed the fear of mass unemployment. Writing at a time when millions were unemployed, fascism was on the march, and other tangible evidences of social decay all around him, Laski may perhaps be pardoned for having imagined that things were getting desperate. Indeed, they were--although other factors than democratic socialism finally rescued "private enterprise" from stagnation.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that many of the premises of Laski's analyses were simply wrong. Even granting his general estimate of the nature of the capitalist crisis, some of his central theoretical propositions were mistaken. He certainly over-idealized the Soviet Union. As with other thinkers influenced by Marxism, he at first completely misunderstood the rise of fascism. He did not agree with the Stalinists that it was evidence of capitalist weakness or expect its easy overthrow, but he fully shared the assumption that it simply represented another form of capitalist repression of the working classes.

With other Marxists, Laski lumped together German Naziism, Mussolini's regime, the generals' revolt in Spain, and the government of Japan as examples of the same phenomenon. He underestimated both the mass support and revolutionary quality of German fascism, and the extent to which German capitalism suffered eclipse under the Hitler

regime. It is true that he developed a more sophisticated analysis after the Hitler-Stalin Pact--one which is still worth studying--but he often relapsed into his earlier, more simplistic analysis. In general, the attempt to understand fascism within Marxian categories was not terribly successful.²⁸

Yet other aspects of Laski's prudential case have proved more lasting contributions to political science. More than any other democratic theorist, he came to grips with the problem of consensus. In a way, this emphasis followed from his early "pluralist" concern with voluntary consensus. More than anyone else, he explored the problem of maintaining agreement on procedures when there are fundamental disputes over the ends of the state. As a political theorist, one of his strong points was always his willingness to confront difficult problems, like the viability of cherished values such as freedom and consent under conditions of severe political conflict.

Some writers have criticized his position on consensus from the point of view that only agreement on procedures is necessary in a democracy.²⁹ They have argued that democracy, involving freedom and dissent, requires only procedural consensus--not agreement on fundamental beliefs, values or interests. This line of reasoning is probably correct so far as it goes. But the real question is whether

²⁸See S. J. Woolf, ed., The Nature of Fascism (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968); and I. L. Horowitz, The Foundations of Political Sociology (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 231-250.

²⁹C. J. Friedrich, The New Belief in the Common Man (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942), pp. 151-186; and Charles Frankel, The Democratic Prospect (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 24-29, 188.

under crisis conditions there will continue to be consensus on procedures. Laski was not writing about a static or equilibrium state. He was concerned with profound disagreements over policy and power.

Recently, some behavioral political scientists have suggested that democracy may be possible without consensus on either means or ends. They have argued that mass political apathy can make for stability even in the absence of agreement on beliefs or policies. In addition, they have called attention to non-normative factors making for cohesion. But regardless of their validity, such assertions do not really touch Laski's analysis. The gathering of data purporting to show disagreement among individuals in a stable democracy is beside the point. Laski's argument was that when fundamental beliefs or interests were challenged, men would abandon agreement on procedures if they felt threatened by the probable outcome of existing decision-making procedures.³⁰

Some critics have maintained that Laski's discussion is ambiguous and that his "theory" does not predict. They have suggested that the reasoning is circular: "fundamentals" are those disagreements which turn out in retrospect to have been crucial in breakdowns. In other words, they have asked that his theory predict which fundamentals will

³⁰ See J. W. Prothro and C. W. Grigg, "Fundamental Principles of Democracy," Journal of Politics, XXII, (May, 1960), 276-294; Herbert McClosky, "Consensus and Ideology in American Politics," American Political Science Review, LVIII, (June, 1964), 361-382; F. H. Willhoite, "Political Order and Consensus," Western Political Quarterly XVI (June, 1963), 294-304; and P. H. Partridge, Consent and Consensus (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 96-119.

cause breakdowns of consensus.³¹ Leaving aside from the fact that Laski did make concrete suggestions about what men tend to regard as "fundamental", this line of argument can be challenged on another ground. The social sciences are not exactly affluent in laws or theories admitting of social prophecy or macro-prediction. There are reasons for rejecting in principle the possibility of such theories. In any case, there are not enough of them at present to make prediction a reasonable critical norm.

In summary, it must be admitted that Laski's prudential reasoning represents an outdated paradigm. His reasoning on the necessity of socialism in order to preserve parliamentary democracy was invalidated by the events of the 'thirties and 'forties. While it is possible to gain insights from his theorizing, Laski's prudential case proved mistaken. Other factors than democratic socialism proved the salvation of the capitalist democracies. And the Soviet Union proved an attractive example for a time--but to the "developing nations" of the Third World rather than to the advanced capitalist societies of the West. The capitalist democracies proved to have more options open than Laski expected.

³¹Peter Gay, The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 7-8.

CHAPTER IV

What is the relationship between socialism and democracy? Laski argued that socialism could fulfill the promise of democracy, and in the 'thirties and 'forties maintained that without socialism democracy would not survive. He believed that democratic socialism represented the best attainable form of polity, and that socialists both could and should act as genuine socialists and genuine democrats in the practical political activity necessary to achieve democratic socialism in the advanced industrial societies.

But in spite of the many pages in his works concerned with democracy and socialism, Laski never produced a systematic analysis or case. Can socialism be democratic? Should socialists be democrats? Must socialism involve democracy? Laski did not distinguish the possible types or dimensions of argument about democracy and socialism. He never attempted a systematic discussion of the full range of questions posed by the many interrelationships between the two key elements of his political philosophy. He never really undertook to examine the basic means-ends relationships involved in a comprehensive manner and never produced the kind of methodical case which would be required to convince someone who did not share most of his premisses. Most of the time Laski took ends for granted and argued questions of means.

The explanation for Laski's tendency to take ends for granted involves his audiences. Writing as a political activist for audiences

in the two most stable capitalist democracies, there was little need or inclination to present basic arguments for democracy. Laski also probably felt that his early works dealt with such issues. Basically, his writings on democracy and socialism take it for granted that socialism should be democratic. He was concerned to argue that socialism could be democratic and to discuss various aspects of how it could be. For the most part, Laski wrote rejoinders to those who did not believe democratic socialism possible. He tried to refute arguments that socialism could not or did not have to be democratic.

Since Laski never attempted any systematic discussion, there is no point in trying to collect his random statements on the various dimensions of the relationship between democracy and socialism. The best way to understand the evolution of Laski's thought on the problem is to look at the issues involving the relationship with which he was most concerned. This chapter therefore sets out the development of his thought on the problem of liberty in the socialist state, the issue of the status of democracy in the period of transition to socialism, and the question of the relevance of the issue of democracy vs. dictatorship to the politics of so-called "backward" nations.

I

The problem of liberty in the socialist state is of course a multi-faceted question. Among the issues are the protection of rights, opportunity for dissent and the control of bureaucracy. Laski's initial position on the whole range was quite libertarian. Because his commitment to socialism developed out of the quasi-syndicalist background of "pluralism", he was very sensitive to the fate of liberty

under socialism. He stressed mass participation and the importance of maintaining rights over against the state. In the Grammar of Politics (1925), he combined his emphasis on decentralized authority with his new commitment to socialism. This combination has led some writers to accuse him of inconsistency, if not muddle-headedness. In fact, Laski was searching for a synthesis which would do justice to the insights of both pluralism and socialism.¹

The clue to the book is to be found in the running commentary on guild socialism throughout the volume. Though Laski was never a guild socialist, he shared for some years their distrust of nationalization and fears about the possibilities of despotism in the centralized socialist state. He wanted mass participation and decentralization as safeguards of freedom, but was unable to go all the way with the guild socialists because he felt that their schemes neglected the legitimate interests of the total community.

Laski felt that the guild socialists' plans for turning over control of the economy to the workers, and managing enterprises by the majority vote of their employees, neglected the rights and interests of the community as a whole. He believed that guild socialism neglected the political dimension of coordination and control, provided no method of representing men in their roles other than that of producer, and did not confront the possibility of exploitation of the community by the guilds. While admitting that such an attitude reflected pessimism, he argued that "we have been betrayed by human nature so often

¹See Herbert Deane, The Political Ideas of Harold J. Laski, pp. 77-99; and Bernard Zylstra, From Pluralism to Collectivism (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1968), pp. 94-126.

that it is elementary wisdom to safeguard ourselves against it."²

In effect, Laski wanted a form of state socialism decentralized and flexible enough to guarantee freedom. The state should be strong enough to manage and control the economy, but subject to enough checks and balances to remain amenable to the control of the people. Its purpose would be to guarantee an extended Bill of Rights--but it must be checked and scrutinized regularly like any other state. In the last resort, he felt, people must have the right of disobedience, should the state fail in practice to perform the functions allotted to it in theory.

In the Grammar, the state is still characterized in "pluralist" fashion as one association among many. But it becomes the primary association--the source of central direction and coordination--of the community as a whole. For the modern state does differ from the other associations of the Great Society. "Membership is compulsory upon all that live within its territorial ambit, and...it can, in the last resort, enforce its obligations upon its subjects."³ Under the circumstances, it is impossible to deny that the state is qualitatively unique. Laski did not, however, draw the conclusion that its key functions should absolve it of openness to moral scrutiny.

By 1930, Laski had ceased to be a "pluralist" and in his book on Liberty in the Modern State the sovereign state occupies the center stage. As regards freedom, however, he had not ceased to be concerned

²Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 444. On guild socialism, cf. pp. 69-70, 72-73, 82-84, 138-140, 439-444. The Yugoslav experience of decentralized workers councils would seem to indicate the realism of Laski's fears about local units disregarding the interests of the larger community.

³Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 37; cf. pp. 69-70.

with setting standards for the limits of appropriate governmental action. Indeed, his book is a plea for a wide degree of political and cultural freedom in society; he is concerned with the justification of political and intellectual liberty. He wants socialism in order to go beyond the limits of the freedom available in advanced capitalist society. He defends freedom both as an intrinsic good and an instrumental value.

Thus, despite his formal acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the state, Laski's outlook remained decidedly libertarian. He carried over from his early writings the notion of liberty as a system of rights, designed to foster and protect those conditions essential to individual self-realization. In spite of his ostensibly negative definition of freedom, liberty became the absence of restraint on those conditions essential to growth. Laski believed that liberty so defined was dependent upon explicit political arrangements, but also on the atmosphere of society--the climate of opinion--and also upon the character of the men and women in society--their willingness to stand up for their rights. The state, on his view, exists to safeguard and extend the system of rights to all. Among the rights were participation, due process and judicial impartiality.

Laski argued that freedom could only be maintained in a democracy, though noting that democratic government is not a sufficient condition for liberty. In his words:

Everyone who considers the relation of liberty to the institutions of a state will, I think, find it difficult to resist the conclusion that without democracy there cannot be liberty... consider...what democracy implies. It involves a frame of government in which, first, men are given the chance of making the government under which they live, in which, also, the laws that the government promulgates are binding equally upon all. I

do not think that the average man can be made happy merely by living in a democracy; I do not see how he can avoid a continuous sense of frustration unless he does. For if he does not share in making the government...he is excluded from that which secures him the certainty that his experience counts.⁴

Laski felt that liberty of thought and expression were desirable both as intrinsic goods and as instrumental guarantees of avenues of protest for redress of grievance. Denial of such liberties could always, he argued, be traced to some narrow, special interest group dedicated to the defense of privilege. He argued that restrictions on "sedition" and "blasphemy" were simply covers for repression, though he did endorse restrictions in the area of personal libel.

On the issue of the curtailment of civil liberties in emergencies, his position was exceedingly libertarian. Arguing that suppression never convinces, that dissent indicates grievance, and that government can gain from criticism, he maintained that the written word ought never to be censored (including publications aimed at the armed forces in wartime). He also felt that freedom of speech should be maintained in wartime, though he did concede restrictions in regard to combat zones and endorsed the "clear and present danger test" as applied to potential riot situations. By and large, except in the presence of immediate threat of disorder, Laski felt that freedom of expression should not be interfered with or curtailed. He went so far as to argue for the importance of maintaining freedom of expression in revolutionary situations, to preserve a sense of limits and prevent abuses. In general, he put the limit of freedom at the attempted forcible over-

⁴Laski, Liberty in the Modern State, p. 66.

throw of the state by armed rebellion.⁵

Laski's views on liberty underwent some changes in the nineteen-thirties, but less in terms of desirable goals than in relation to the probable outcomes of social conflict. The sovereign state came to dominate his theoretical efforts as "pluralism" faded from his analyses. But the latter never disappeared entirely. Indeed, Laski came to hold that pluralism might someday become relevant--in the classless society of the future, wherein equal claims on the common good would make for the possibility of a common interest. In effect, he came to identify pluralism's desire for the disappearance of sovereignty with the Marxian notion of the "withering away of the state."⁶

Pending the arrival of the classless society, he predicted continual social, political and economic conflict. Building upon the Marxian theory of the state, he came to hold that sovereignty was both necessary and inevitable in terms of the allotted functions of the capitalist state. But in the matter of the limits of freedom, Laski continued to hold to the libertarian position he had put forward in 1930. In a series of lectures to graduate students at the University of Washington in 1939, he emphasized the importance of civil liberties, due process and democratic safeguards against bureaucracy.⁷

⁵Ibid., pp. 113-114, 142-149. Laski endorsed a "clear and present danger test" but not the (U. S. Supreme Court) "clear and present danger test." He had a much more libertarian view of what constitutes an immediate threat to public order.

⁶Laski, A Grammar of Politics, pp. x-xiii. (1937 Preface).

⁷H. J. Laski, An Introduction to Contemporary Politics (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1939), pp. 35-41 and passim.

Laski's most comprehensive discussion of the problem of liberty in the socialist state can be found in several books and essays published during the Second World War. He did not so much argue the case for democracy under socialism, as argue that socialism would not substitute bureaucratic dictatorship for parliamentary democracy. He was mostly concerned with refuting conservative charges that socialist planning would destroy freedom by erecting a massive state bureaucracy.

In general, he maintained that the shift from laissez-faire to planning was accompanied by the substitution of positive for negative freedom. In the past, the main concern had been to protect the individual (and especially the businessman) from the state. Freedom had become a function of property: the more property one acquired, the freer one became. The idea of positive freedom, he argued, involves not "the absence of interference from the State-power but...the creation of opportunities."⁸ Where absence of interference had assured liberty for the few, a planned democracy would so organize things as to ensure effective freedom for the many. Planning would thus enlarge the scope of freedom in society by extending its benefits to those hitherto excluded.

Laski desired a society in which planning for mass welfare would replace the unfair competition and unequal freedom characteristic of capitalist society. He wanted a society both planned and free. "The ultimate control of a planned democracy must be, through electoral choice, in the hands of a representative assembly to which the main

⁸H. J. Laski, "Choosing the Planners," Plan for Britain, ed. by G. D. H. Cole (London: Labour Book Service, 1943), p. 115.

executive authority must be directly responsible."⁹ In general, he envisaged the retention of parliamentary government, though with certain reforms such as the abolition or limitation of the powers of second chambers such as the British House of Lords. He also had extensive reform plans for the civil service, designed to make for greater mobility and to ensure wider access to its positions.

Laski denied that bureaucracy per se was the enemy of freedom. He argued that planning is no more than the reduction of chaos to order, that private interests already did a considerable amount of planning--though without being either open to criticism or responsible to any public body. Indeed, he maintained that there were few private organizations as "open to public scrutiny as the public departments." The decisions of the government, moreover, were "based upon a process of consultation with the organized interests affected which few big private companies can rival."¹⁰

Laski believed that the protection of freedom under socialism would depend as much upon extra-governmental prerequisites as upon formal governmental arrangements. On the positive side, he listed the Anglo-American tradition of self-government, the tradition of ecclesiastical democracy, and the participatory aspects of the trade union and cooperative movements. All of these could be counted upon to predispose citizens to be vigilant in defence of their liberties; such factors would aid in maintaining freedom under socialism.

⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰ H. J. Laski, Will Planning Restrict Freedom? (Cheam: The Architectural Press, 1944), pp. 3-4.

In addition, he believed that socialists could "plan for freedom" by increasing educational opportunities, and by planning decentralized institutional structures which would facilitate mass participation in the processes of decision-making. Socialism would of course eliminate or reduce certain forms of economic freedom, but Laski saw no reason to believe that the loss of political and intellectual freedom would have to follow. He did maintain, however, that the sphere of liberty in the socialist state would depend to a considerable extent on whether "the transformation is effected by force or persuasion."¹¹ If a socialist government were forced to fight a civil war, the emergent political system would of necessity be less libertarian than a socialist state achieved by parliamentary means.

Laski's most elaborate blueprint for a socialist state envisaged a central planning board made up of "generalists" chosen by and responsible to Parliament. This group would function more or less as an economic Cabinet--responsible for the preparation and presentation of a general economic plan, but not for the administrative control of any specific government departments. The government would have the power to plan general economic priorities.

He was aware that state ownership did not of itself mean socialism. He insisted upon the responsibility of all nationalized industries to the elected legislature; on workers' representation in the nationalized plants; and on consumer representation both on the planning commissions and within the nationalized industries.¹² As far as the scope of

¹¹Ibid., p. 28.

¹²Laski, "Choosing the Planners," pp. 117-118, 122-123.

socialization was concerned, he believed that in order to plan effectively certain controls would have to exist: over capital and credit, the ownership of land, the import and export trade, and transport, fuel and power. In general, most large firms should be nationalized, though Laski felt it desirable that most medium and small enterprises be left in private hands.¹³

Laski reiterated many times his claim that limitation of the free market need not lead to loss of political freedom. Not only did he deny any intrinsic connection between planning and dictatorship, but he took the offensive in arguing that liberalism had not always been very enthusiastic about democracy. Capitalism, he maintained, had always sought to limit the sphere of freedom for the many under liberal democracy; in addition, since the Great War, the ruling class had been supportive or tolerant of the fascist enemies of democracy. Capitalists tended, he argued, to "assume that when the needs of the working man begin to affect the habits of business enterprise the logic of democracy is in danger."¹⁴

A planned democracy would offer freedom for the many. An economy of abundance would liberate men from insecurity and fear of want; with such liberation they could turn their energies to important social problems. A planned economy would ensure the material base for something better than competition and mass frustration. In subordination to social purpose, ordinary men and women would find an integration of

¹³Laski, Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, pp. 307-309.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 323; cf. pp. 311-316, 323-324, 340-341.

personality--a meaning in life--apart from the narrow kinds of self-expression possible in a society dominated by the performance of an economic function.¹⁵

Laski was particularly concerned about intellectual and cultural freedom under socialism. He believed that freedom of speech must be protected, subject only to limitation to control civil disorder and punish libel. He felt that steps would have to be taken to prevent information from becoming a governmental monopoly. He was also concerned that socialists be sensitive to the need for the protection of non-conformity. In his words:

Be its inconveniences what they may, without the nonconformist a planned society would lack the dynamic of freedom and its planners would rapidly degenerate into tyrants...The non-conformist is the bulward against absolute power. Let us, then, plan for him a large place in the Socialist society of to-morrow.¹⁶

Laski's concept of a planned democracy was thus very much a matter of a free society planning for even greater freedom. It included government by consent, maintenance of civil liberties, and encouragement of mass participation in vital decision-making. At an institutional level, he envisioned mechanisms of participation more democratic than the limited political forms of involvement available in a capitalist democracy. He was sensitive to the need for dissent and non-conformity in the socialist society. At the level of means, he wanted and worked for transition to socialism by parliamentary means.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 339, 351-352, 358-360.

¹⁶ Laski, "Choosing the Planners," p. 125.

The British Labour government after 1945 certainly represented democratic as against authoritarian socialism. But Laski was not satisfied with its achievements from the standpoint of democratization. He felt that narrow criteria of economic efficiency and even profitability had too often taken precedence over democratic values in determination of the forms of administration in the various nationalized industries. He suggested a number of changes looking to greater decentralization, different procedures of hiring and firing, and a new system of consultation which would maximize worker participation. As he acidly remarked, "We do not look for a profit from the national system of education."¹⁷

In the lectures on British government which Laski delivered at Manchester University shortly before he died, his main purpose was to defend and vindicate the House of Commons and its role in the British parliamentary system. He was very critical of the bureaucracy which conservatives suppose socialists to have such great affection for, and he put forward numerous suggestions designed to make for greater sensitivity on its part to the popular will as expressed in majority rule. Thus, to the end Laski was concerned with the problem of liberty in the socialist state.¹⁸

II

Laski's position on transition to socialism in 1925 was a clear and unambiguous commitment to parliamentary socialism. In his opinion,

¹⁷Laski, Trade Unions in the New Society, p. 159; cf. pp. 155-161.

¹⁸H. J. Laski, Reflections on the Constitution (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1951).

the experience of the U.S.S.R. had demonstrated the folly of expecting a rapid transition. He looked forward to a lengthy period of experiment with diverse forms of socialization. A mass labor party would presumably win a series of electoral contests and gradually introduce socialism. All this would take place within the limits of ordinary parliamentary politics.

But even in 1925, he could not avoid noting that the possibility or necessity of revolution could not be ruled out a priori by socialists. If economic conditions were to deteriorate or reforms come too slowly, the workers might revolt and overthrow capitalism. Laski pointed out that the legitimacy of the existing system had been weakened; in circumstances of adversity, the workers might overthrow it. He recommended reforms both in respect to wage levels and industrial democracy. But though he considered the possibility of revolution, he did not recommend it; in his opinion, revolution in an advanced industrial society could only reduce "the standard of living for vast populations to the level of the Indian ryot."¹⁹

Laski's book on Communism (1927) contains his first extended reflections on the problem of transition to socialism. He criticized the Communists severely for their dogma of the inevitability of violent revolution. Arguing that capitalism might discover a method of sustaining its vitality--or prove more flexible than expected--he postulated a variety of possible futures. He pointed out that it might be succeeded by fascism or chaos rather than the dictatorship of the proletariat. In an advanced industrial society, communism might not

¹⁹ Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. 540.

work. In general, Laski was quite critical of the Marxian prophecies of the Communists.

In fact, he was sceptical of revolutions in general:

Those who direct them may be compelled to give way before demands which destroy their original demands. The leaders who seize power for one end may choose to maintain power for quite different ends. Or they may be unable to meet the forces of counter-revolution, and the new condition may be worst than the first. The means, moreover, involved in the use of violence may so enter into the original end as completely to transform its nature...There is the final problem of creating the new society in terms of the promised ideal. Each of these... involves considerations which the communist is inclined, perhaps too easily, to brush aside.²⁰

Aside from these considerations, Laski was critical of the tactical model of the Communists. He felt that it was quite unlikely that revolutionaries in an advanced industrial society could muster the necessary military potential. Lenin had been lucky in 1917, but under normal circumstances, Laski argued, "the hostility of the army and navy is certain."

Assuming that an insurrection got off the ground, it would be necessary to feed people. "In any but a predominantly agricultural society, this would be practically impossible if the state credit were impaired."²¹ Other states sympathetic to the old regime might intervene. And even if all these obstacles were to be met and overcome, Laski asserted, the resultant dictatorship might not fade away. He asked on what grounds the Communists expected "those who control it... to accede to its termination."²²

²⁰H. J. Laski, Communism (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), pp. 167-168. First published in 1927.

²¹Ibid., p. 169.

²²Ibid., p. 174.

At the very least, he insisted, the parliamentary way deserved to be tried. It seemed obvious to him that there could be no justification for an appeal to force unless the other alternatives had been tried and found wanting. In a period of universal suffrage it ought to be possible to capture the state power at the polls; this would have the additional merit of throwing "upon the capitalist the onus of revolt against socialist democracy."²³ Those who were loyal to constitutionalism would thus be on the socialist side; under the circumstances, the government would probably retain the loyalty or at least the neutrality of the armed services. In any event, it seemed to Laski that drastic measures should not be contemplated until the obvious methods have failed. Revolution represented the former; democracy the latter.

Laski's writings of the late 1920's continued the same kind of combination of argument for the desirability of parliamentary transition and warning about the ultimate possibility of revolution. He came to accept the broad outlines of the Marxian paradigm of class conflict, while repudiating the doctrine of class war and the prediction of inevitability of violent revolution. In 1928, he insisted that the Marxian philosophy was, in general, both "simple and true." But he added that the probable cost of applying the Communist interpretation of Marxism would likely be the ends which Marx proclaimed.²⁴ Laski denied that freedom, equality and social justice would be the probable

²³Ibid., p. 172.

²⁴H. J. Laski, "The Value and Defects of the Marxian Philosophy," Current History, XXIX (October, 1928), 23-29.

consequences of a regime of proletarian dictatorship born of intense class conflict or civil war.

By 1930, however, Laski had become more pessimistic. He pointed out that more and more people were becoming dissatisfied with the performance of the capitalist system. As they came to realize that privilege stood in the way of necessary reforms, they would be motivated to experiment with socialistic solutions. Should this happen, he predicted, "it may well be that a new Napoleon will be demanded to put a term to [their] enquiries."²⁵ Nevertheless, such occasional comment notwithstanding, it was the fall of the Second Labour Government in 1931 which really shook Laski's faith in the possibility of peaceful transition to socialism.

The way in which the Second Labour Government passed from the scene had important effects on Laski's political philosophy. If a democratically-elected socialist government could be driven from office by "loss of confidence" in the business community, what hope was left for democratic socialism? If international bankers could veto a socialist economic policy, what hope remained for democratic socialism in one country? Laski acknowledged the contributions made by the Macdonald government to its own demise, but insisted that capitalist sabotage had played an important part.²⁶

The replacement "National" Government came into existence by way

²⁵Laski, Studies in Law and Politics, pp. 102-103.

²⁶See Royden Harrison, "Labour Government: Then and Now," Political Quarterly, XLI, (January, 1970), 67-82; and Ralph Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism (rev. ed.; London: Merlin Press, 1972), pp. 152-192.

of a dissolution agreed to by Macdonald without consultation with either his cabinet or any responsible Labour Party body. The King had exercised some political initiative. Laski saw all of this as setting some very unfortunate precedents. In effect, Macdonald had shown how a Prime Minister might make himself an independent force, by utilizing the residual powers of the office. By ignoring his role as a party leader, he had undermined the principle of the "collective responsibility of the cabinet" and the system of party government. The Crown had acted as an "efficient" rather than merely "dignified" part of the Constitution. The new government was, in part, "born of a Palace Revolution."²⁷

Laski did not draw from the experience of 1931 the inference that revolution was necessary or inevitable; but he did begin to speculate on the kind of resistance a government determined to embark on a socialist policy might meet. He was not the only one so affected: R. H. Tawney and Clement Attlee also began to theorize about the problem of transition in a more pessimistic manner.²⁸ His use of Marxian categories differentiates Laski's discussions, but the point is that many members of the Labour Party began to consider the possibility of something other than peaceful, constitutional transition.

Laski's main conclusions had to do with the future of the party system. He anticipated that deepening economic crisis would result in

²⁷H. J. Laski, The Crisis and the Constitution (London: The Hogarth Press and the Fabian Society, 1932), p. 34.

²⁸See R. H. Tawney, "The Choice Before the Labour Party," Political Quarterly, III, (July, 1932), 325-345; Clement Attlee, The Labour Party in Perspective (London: Gollancz, 1937).

drastic political polarization. Labour would probably adopt a thorough-going socialist programme; Macdonald-like reformism of merely seeking to extend the boundaries of social reform had been shown to be bankrupt. Laski was worried that the consequent weakening of consensus on fundamentals might undermine constitutional government in Britain.

Given the power of the bankers and the matter of "business confidence," he posed the question whether a socialist government could not be turned out of office at any time simply by withdrawal of "confidence". Laski called upon the Labour Party to face the genuine threat to evolutionary socialism posed by such a possibility. He noted the British tradition of compromise, and the difficulty of extrapolating from the events of 1931. But he insisted that all that had happened did call into question the "traditional hypothesis that the mere conquest of a majority is a sure road to a Socialist victory."²⁹

Laski's whole theoretical effort to develop a paradigm of "democracy in crisis" grew out of his reappraisal of the problem of transition after the debacle of 1931. In a series of pamphlets, essays and his book on Parliamentary Government in England, over the next few years he developed a comprehensive paradigm of the prospects for peaceful transition to socialism in Britain. He reviewed his assessment from time to time to take account of new developments in British politics and in the rapidly changing international situation.

He reaffirmed his faith in democracy. He denied the legitimacy of revolutionary tactics in a functioning democracy. But he believed that socialists must be ready to face the possibility that their

²⁹ Laski, The Crisis and the Constitution, p. 56.

opponents might abandon democracy for extra-constitutional action.³⁰

By 1933, Laski had developed his paradigm of transition based upon what he took to be the lessons of 1931. He began by working from the assumptions that the entire constitutional machinery--and especially the Crown and the House of Lords--must be viewed as "a part of the tactic of reaction" and that the Labour Party had finally come around to seeing that "the purpose of Socialists is Socialism." The major conclusion he drew from the fall of the Macdonald government was that "the problem of the Labour Party...begins...with the capture of a Parliamentary majority."³¹

He recommended that if another minority Labour government came into being, it should not refuse to assume power. It should act as if it were a majority government--pushing bold measures to solve unemployment, taking the first steps to introduce socialism. If defeated in the Commons, it could then go to the country on a bold policy backed by determination to succeed. Such evidence of purpose, he declared, would capture the imagination of the electorate.

He took it for granted that various tactics would be tried to undermine any Socialist government. He predicted a flight from the pound, selling of British securities, and the withdrawal of short-term loans by creditors. The King might try another "National" government proposal, with great rhetoric about the gravity of the crisis and the necessity of an "all party" or "above party" coalition. Such a

³⁰Laski, Democracy in Crisis, pp. 249-250.

³¹H. J. Laski, The Labour Party and the Constitution (London: The Socialist League, 1933), p. 1.

tactic would be designed to postpone any socialist solution to the crisis. Secondly, the government in office might attempt to hang on to power by persuading the King to call another election, in hopes of reversing the verdict of a socialist victory at the polls. In an atmosphere of financial panic, such a tactic might succeed in undermining a newly elected Labour government. If Labour should assume power, it might find itself blocked by the House of Lords. As a last resort, the reactionaries might even try dictatorship.

Considering such possible reactions to a Labour electoral victory, Laski argued that the Party should not assume power without the prior consent of the King to the creation of sufficient peers to override the Lords and to the ultimate abolition of the upper chamber. He believed that Labour would require an Emergency Powers Act on assuming office in order to cope with the financial crisis. The Lords could not be allowed to obstruct such legislation; and there would not be time for the kind of leisurely restriction of the power of the upper house which occupied politicians in 1901-1911.³²

He also recommended changes in the process of selection of the Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues. Laski suggested that the choice of the former be vested in the membership of the Labour majority in the newly-elected House of Commons, and that this selection be subject to the approval of the National Joint Council of Labour. As for the cabinet, he felt that they should be nominated by committee--composed of the Prime Minister, three representatives of the Parliamentary Party, and two from the National Joint Council. The structure of

³²Ibid., pp. 3-16.

the cabinet should be reorganized along more functional lines.

In general, Laski wanted a return to strong party government. In proposing a return to the "collective responsibility of the cabinet," he went beyond the earlier meaning to propose that certain specific types of issues be made mandatory matters of collective approval. Among them were resignation, dissolution, vacancies, and all relations between the Prime Minister and the King. In addition, he proposed changes in the civil service, the judiciary and the position and powers of the Crown.³³

Thus, Laski did not propose extra-constitutional action by socialists; he anticipated it on the part of Labour's opponents, perhaps in association with the King. The changes he proposed were designed to make British government more responsive to the popular will as reflected in the parliamentary majority. He anticipated that illegal opposition would come from Labour's opponents.

In 1938, Laski published Parliamentary Government in England, an essay on the future of democracy in Britain in the form of a survey of political institutions. The theme was the problematic future of the traditional stability of institutions in Great Britain. Given the growing divergence of point of view between the major political parties, and the market contraction and scarcity of demand characteristic of capitalism in decline, Laski was worried about the weakening of consensus and the implications of this for the future of democratic government. He believed that the traditional prerequisites of stability were disappearing. Under the circumstances, what were the prospects of peaceful

³³Ibid., pp. 16-27.

transition to socialism?

Laski was worried that the ruling class might choose to fight rather than yield power. "The temptation to a party of property to use all its influence, direct and hidden, to rid itself of its opponents...appears to be immense."³⁴ He instanced Italy, Germany, Austria and Spain as examples of determination on the part of the ruling class to overthrow democracy rather than risk the loss of traditional privileges. As far as Britain was concerned, he maintained that he was not accusing the Conservative Party of deliberate intent to "destroy the Constitution" but suggested that "men value the forms of government at least as much for what they do as for what they are."³⁵

The pre-war Labour Party had tacitly accepted the consensual foundations of British politics; indeed, it had denied the class struggle, accepted marginal utility economics, condoned imperialism and made a fetish of parliamentary tactics. With the commitment of the party to socialism, Laski argued, things had changed.- Labour could not expect to win the confidence of its opponents--"the running of a capitalist society is best left to those who believe in it." Trying to win business "confidence" would satisfy neither the business community nor Labour's own constituency; socialists cannot win such confidence, he argued, "without surrendering their claim to be socialists."³⁶

Laski assumed that Labour would come to power in the midst of

³⁴H. J. Laski, Parliamentary Government in England (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), p. 28.

³⁵Ibid., p. 29.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 198-199.

economic crisis and, possibly, manipulated panic. If the Conservatives had fought the election on predicting ruin in the event of a Labour victory, could they then turn around and ask their supporters to cooperate as patriotic citizens--"citizens, be it remembered, who believe themselves thereby to be called upon to sacrifice the privileges to which they believe themselves entitled?"³⁷ Laski felt that even if the Conservatives should attempt such an "heroic" act of statesmanship, they might not carry the ruling class with them. He suggested that few ruling classes have ever voluntarily surrendered power.

In 1943, Laski discussed at length the problem of transition. At that point, he felt that the ruling class in England had three basic alternatives:

It must be able to achieve recovery upon a scale which removes the disbelief in its capacity to govern successfully...Or it must destroy the democracy which has been the main form of its political expression in order to attack the historic institutions of the working class through which the disbelief in its capacity to rule is organized into action. Or, again, it must itself inaugurate fundamental changes which permit the adaptation of the relations of production to the forces of production. It must, that is to say, inaugurate that rarest of historical phenomena, a revolution by consent.³⁸

Laski was worried that the second choice might seem the most attractive.

He himself of course favored the last possibility, though he had doubts about the willingness of the ruling class to accept socialism. He anticipated that the inability of capitalism to revive after the war would confront the British people with a period of severe class

³⁷ Ibid., p. 86; cf. pp. 102-104.

³⁸ Laski, Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, p. 37.

conflict, with the ultimate danger of civil war. He was sceptical of the preparedness of the Labour Party for the kind of post-war world he envisaged. He felt that the leadership was too old, over-cautious and narrow in outlook. He called for a "spiritual revolution" in the Labour Party. Only a more capable leadership could be trusted to maneuver successfully in the dangerous times ahead. Among the possibilities Laski was worried about was the emergence of a mass fascist movement in England.³⁹

In this frame of mind, Laski put forward an analysis more drastic than any contained in his earlier writings. Though the main thrust was still his argument for the possibility and desirability of revolution by consent, and he still repudiated the Communist dogma of the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat, he advanced some ideas which can only with difficulty be squared with democratic socialism. At best, his suggestions were equivocal, and advanced with a certain degree of vagueness about the circumstances under which they might be expected to be implemented.

After quoting Marx's definition of freedom as the "recognition of necessity," Laski went on to suggest that "every society is built upon a system of postulates...and...freedom is available only within the limits of that" system. From this he drew the conclusion that "the acceptance of a planned economy involves the necessity...that the decision to plan is broadly respected." He felt that freedom would survive in a planned society if the decision to plan were based on widespread consent, but that the decision means a "social purpose" to

³⁹Ibid., pp. 199-201; cf. pp. 88-89, 161, 274.

which "the mass of citizens must conform."⁴⁰

This is acceptable, and Laski's immediate examples of the curtailment of certain capitalist economic freedoms are well within the logic of democratic transition. But these passages are followed by a much more drastic line of argument:

No government will permit a challenge, open or secret, to the imperatives behind which it places the fundamental authority of the state-power...Men who have the responsibility for ultimate social decisions will only tolerate criticism of those decisions so long as the critics do not threaten the agreed values upon which those decisions are based. That, quite frankly, is why, so far, the existence of socialist parties in capitalist democracies has been permitted...There is no reason to suppose that a government built upon the principle of planning will differ, in this regard, from a government committed...to the laissez-faire principle.⁴¹

And:

Once the character of its state-power is set by the fact that the vital instruments of production are publicly, and not privately owned, the field of party action, as distinct from the philosophies of parties, must be related to the consequences inherent in that principle. A Conservative Party is, formally, conceivable in a socialist democracy which urges an abandonment of socialism and a return to...private enterprise; but its actual measures will always be essentially related to the framework of action implied in the socialist character of the state-power. Its ideas, in short, will operate in the society very much as the ideas of the Communist Party operate in a capitalist democracy. They will be tolerated so long as they are not regarded as a danger; they will be persecuted immediately they seem to threaten its foundations.⁴²

In other words, opponents of socialism will be tolerated as long as they are ineffective.

This is followed by a re-definition of freedom. From negative

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 336-337.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 342.

⁴²Ibid., p. 356.

"freedom from interference by the state-power," it will become in a planned society "freedom for the fullest development of the public estate." This of course means that Laski began to define freedom as freedom to disagree about priorities within acceptance of the postulates of socialism. This new freedom, he maintained, would "harmonize the individual and social purpose."⁴³

Though obviously built upon arguments previously present in his political philosophy, this line of reasoning goes much farther than anything in Laski's earlier writings. In effect, it denies to the opponents of socialism any freedom to seriously oppose the transition to socialism. This position is impossible to reconcile with either the logic or ethic of democracy, and bears more than a family resemblance to the ordinary alternative; i.e., dictatorship. Though the discussion is partly predictive, it is also prescriptive. The coexistence of this line of argument in the same book with Laski's sketch of a libertarian state socialism achieved through revolution by consent is not easy to explain.

Laski does not make it very clear under what conditions he was prepared to urge the drastic restrictions on political opposition described. Although it is tempting to suggest that he meant them to cover contingencies such as a socialist government born of civil war, there is direct counter-evidence. For example, Laski makes the very plain argument that "The relations of a community could not be worked out in a rational way if...private persons took over the T.V.A. whenever the Republican Party was in power, and, on the victory of the Democratic

⁴³Ibid., p. 357.

Party, it was returned again to government ownership."⁴⁴

The authoritarian line of argument described does not recur in Laski's post-war writings. In 1946, he made the much more typical judgment that "social democracy is better and more firmly established by the method of freedom than by the abandonment of freedom in the hope that, after long and bitter conflict, it may be recovered once more."⁴⁵ The standpoint of his posthumously published commentary on his wartime writings is completely that of an orthodox democratic socialist.⁴⁶

With the exception of his wartime discussion, Laski's position on transition was consistently democratic. He talked much about extra-constitutional action,* but expected that it would be initiated by the opponents of socialism. Though his writings are full of discussion of revolution, Laski never favored such a course except as a drastic last alternative. He pointed out again and again the probable consequences of attempted revolution in the advanced capitalist societies. He feared the defeat of the workers would be the probable outcome, or complete social chaos. In any case, he pointed out that the revolutionary dictatorship, even if successful, would fail to realize the humanistic aims of socialism. Laski always favored democratic transition as the road to socialism; what fluctuated was his assessment of the possibilities of revolution by consent.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 336.

⁴⁵Laski, The Secret Battalion, p. 30.

⁴⁶Laski, The Dilemma of Our Times, passim.

III

Russia was the underdeveloped society trying to modernize which posed for Laski that issue of how consistent with democratic socialism was support for a modernizing dictatorship in a so-called "backward" country. In the early 1920's, he was not very enthusiastic about the Russian Communists; his letters to Mr. Justice Holmes, for example, contain frequent critical remarks on the Soviet regime.⁴⁷ Laski was sceptical about the "transitional" quality of the Bolshevik dictatorship and endorsed the criticisms of the Soviets of such diverse commentators as Bertrand Russell, Emma Goldman and Karl Kautsky. He started out as an orthodox social-democrat, critical of non-democratic methods even in non-democratic societies.

In an interesting passage written in 1923 he commented:

Lenin and Mussolini alike have established a government not of laws but of men. They have degraded public morality by refusing to admit the terms upon which civilized intercourse alone becomes possible. By treating their opponents as criminals, they have made thought itself a disastrous adventure...They have insisted upon the indispensability of themselves and their dogmas even though we cannot afford to pay the price incurred in the enforcement of that notion.⁴⁸

Thus, in the early 1920's Laski lumped communism and fascism together as undesirable manifestations of the breakdown of the rule of law. In the Grammar of Politics (1925), he criticized the Bolsheviks for trying to impose socialism by force.

Laski's first comprehensive discussion of the Russian regime came

⁴⁷M. A. DeWolfe Howe, ed., The Holmes-Laski Letters, I, pp. 252, 292, 380, 510, 545, 687.

⁴⁸H. J. Laski, "Lenin and Mussolini," Foreign Affairs, II, (September, 1923), 54; cited by Deane, op. cit., pp. 72-73.

in his book on Communism (1927). Though sympathetic to the overthrow of Tsarism, he noted that the Bolsheviks had instituted "a new and more powerful tyranny," though one "conceived in the interests of the masses."⁴⁹ The Kerensky government had been confused and incompetent; the Bolsheviks had capitalized upon the genuine issue of the sensibility of continued Russian participation in the World War. The March Revolution had been narrowly political in character; only the Communists had responded to the desires of the masses for peace and land. Once having seized power, they were made secure in its possession by the follies of their opponents. In his opinion, "whatever chances there were of their subsequent failure were entirely negated by the attempts of the Allies to overthrow them."⁵⁰

Laski was willing to acknowledge that the Communist regime had many reforms to its credit. He felt that no one could deny that the Bolsheviks had been motivated by a desire to improve the lot of the common man. In general, he interpreted Communism as a genuinely working-class movement, born of the errors and shortcomings of capitalism and imperialism.

Laski pointed out that, given the chaotic conditions in Russia resulting from the war, revolution and civil war, "no party could have wrought order...without methods that savoured of something akin to

⁴⁹ H. J. Laski, Communism (London: Cass, 1968), p. 50. First published in 1927.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

terrorism."⁵¹ He felt that the Bolsheviks had many solid accomplishments to their credit, and compared them to the Jesuits and Mohammedans in terms of both dogmatism and dedication. He felt that they possessed the same "rigorous and unyielding set of dogmas, the same iron rigour of discipline, the same passionate loyalty capable of unlimited self-confidence."⁵²

All of this notwithstanding, Laski was very critical. He doubted whether a regime built upon fear and violence could give birth to an order rooted in fraternity. He was repelled by Bolshevik dogmatism and simplistic conceptions of the world outside Russia. What bothered him most was the lack of freedom. Elections, for example, were manipulated by methods "that must have caused pangs of envy to the most powerful of American 'bosses'."⁵³

Basically, Laski interpreted Soviet Communism as a quasi-religious movement of national regeneration; he felt that its example was unlikely to prove attractive to others unless Western capitalism were to fail completely to solve its problems of production and social justice. If that should happen, he suggested, "neither the crimes nor the follies of the Russian experiment will lessen its power to compel kindred

⁵¹Ibid., p. 48. The phrase "something akin to terrorism" is an early forerunner of Laski's later apologetics for the Stalin regime. Its cavalier attitude reminds one of George Orwell's remarks on pleasant names for unpleasant things. Cf. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," (1946), Collected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), IV, pp. 127-140.

⁵²Laski, Communism, p. 51.

⁵³Ibid., p. 47.

action."⁵⁴

Most of the themes characteristic of Laski's later writings on Soviet Russia were thus present in his first appraisal: the view of the revolution and the terror as in some sense "historically necessary", the comparison of Bolshevism with various militant religious movements, and so on. The fundamental difference between his early and later writings lies in the evaluation. In 1927, he compared Bolshevism to a militant religious movement to the joint discredit of both; in 1944, he viewed Soviet Communism as a new religion for the West.

The fluctuations in Laski's thinking were due to his changing appraisals of the viability and prospects of capitalism. Throughout the 1930's and 1940's he was rather pessimistic (with some reason) and interested in the "Soviet experiment". He did not become a Communist or endorse Communist ideology, but he did become much more sympathetic to the Soviet Union. As George Orwell later commented: "'Communism is opposed to capitalism: therefore it is progressive and democratic.' This is stupid but it can be accepted by people who are capable of seeing through it sooner or later."⁵⁵ Laski never denied the existence of the dictatorship in Russia, but for much of the 'thirties and 'forties he acted on reasoning similar to that criticized by Orwell.

Laski did not propose that British socialists simply imitate the Soviet example. In fact, he argued that Marx had never really understood British politics, and that Lenin and Trotsky had spent only brief

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 243.

⁵⁵George Orwell, "Burham's View of the Contemporary World Struggle," (1947), Collected Essays, IV, p. 321.

periods in England, and hence did not really have a feél for British politics. In general, he felt that Communist theoreticians saw "the identities they understood" while minimizing "the differences they could not penetrate." In 1933 he went so far as to remark that Western socialists would find that their problems were not going to be solved "by the lessons men have learned from the Russian experience."⁵⁶

But Laski did become much more sympathetic to the U.S.S.R. as the plight of Western capitalism grew worse. Two short pieces of the mid-thirties perhaps best exemplify his attitude. One is his review of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's massive book on Soviet Communism; the other is an essay on "Law and Justice in Soviet Russia."

In his review of the Webb's book, Laski agreed with much of their analysis of government and politics in the Soviet Union. Indeed, he began by noting that

Granted all the errors and crimes that have accompanied the Russian Revolution, it is the one civilization in the world today in which there is well-nigh universal hope...the power to override the vested interests for the sake of corporate well-being. There is no unemployment...An end has been made of things like anti-Semitism and the color war...Only by the acceptance of its premises can we hope to solve that paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty which is now the curse of capitalist civilization.⁵⁷

He saw Russia in the process of building a classless society. He believed that the Soviets had demonstrated the workability of a planned economy, and he was impressed with their achievements in education, judicial reform and public medicine.

⁵⁶Laski, Democracy in Crisis, pp. 254-255, 261.

⁵⁷H. J. Laski, "Balance Sheet of a New Civilization," Saturday Review of Literature, XIII, (March 7, 1936), 3.

Laski was not, however, completely uncritical--with regard to either Russia or the Webb's book. He felt that the latter underestimated the "disease of orthodoxy" they discerned in Soviet life. Laski felt that ideological differences had been penalized "with a drastic severity it is impossible to defend" and that the "controlled uniformity of thought...produced by the...party machine" was incompatible with creative work in cultural and scientific research. He also criticized the re-writing of history, the treatment of political prisoners, and the "official line" on the Kirov assassination.⁵⁸

Laski felt that for Stalin to do away with such abuses could only strengthen and increase the prestige of the Soviet Union. In his words, "A communism which operates an inquisition on grounds indistinguishable from those of its predecessor does a disservice which the Webbs place in wholly inadequate perspective to the greatest ideal of modern times."⁵⁹

Laski's essay on justice in Russia was partly based upon first-hand observation as a visiting professor in 1934. Though in form a descriptive commentary on various aspects of the Soviet legal system, it was as much or more an indictment of British legal practice and a plea for reform in the light of certain Soviet institutions. He was particularly concerned with law reform, the substitution of social science for the case method in legal education, and the growth of legal research in Russia. Laski stressed the absence of the legal profession as a block to reform. He confined himself to the ordinary

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 4.

legal system, and does not mention political cases at all. In part, this may have been due to a limitation of purpose. He wanted to stimulate academic research into the subject of comparative judicial systems, and argued that the Soviet law reforms were at least as worthy of study as "the habits of a Polynesian tribe or the finances of a medieval exchequer."⁶⁰

Laski's attitude toward Russia in the late 1930's can perhaps best be described as sympathetic without being uncritical. He believed that the Russians were building a "new civilization" based upon economic planning and social justice--and out of an illiterate population in a backward country. While admitting the fact of dictatorship--"not only is it a dictatorship: but the ruthlessness with which it has suppressed those hostile to its authority has been sombrely seen in the grim tale of executions since the assassination of Kirov"--he stressed the context of hostility in which the revolution had been born and in which it had had to operate. Nevertheless, he hoped that the future would see the end of the mood in which "every opponent of the men in power seemed necessarily to be a revolutionary conspirator."⁶¹

By 1940, Laski had become a severe critic of Communist policy, but was still trying to maintain a balanced appraisal of the Russian Revolution. In a review, he pointed out that many crimes and blunders had been committed under Stalin's rule--"many of them directly traceable

⁶⁰H. J. Laski, The Danger of Being a Gentleman (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939), p. 58.

⁶¹Laski, Liberty in the Modern State, p. 46. (1937 Preface).

to the needs implicit in Stalin's fight for personal power"⁶²--but he felt that to focus entirely on such things omitted the gains and achievements of the Russian masses under the Stalin regime. He believed that many critics underestimated the "backward state of the U.S.S.R. when the revolution began" and failed to realize the "significance of the time-factor in the whole." In his view, the only thing which might eventually break down the bureaucratic structure of Soviet society would be external security, and this could not be had so long as "the destruction of the U.S.S.R. is a main objective...of the forces of privilege throughout the world."⁶³

In 1943, Laski attempted his own balance sheet of the gains and losses of the Russian experiment. Criticizing those who had come to equate communism with fascism, he admitted certain similarities of technique, but affirmed that "there is nothing in the nature of the Bolshevik state which is alien from [sic] the democratic ideal." While noting a certain loss of idealism and the "hard, even ruthless" discipline in Soviet Russia, he argued that all this could be explained by the "tensions which have so far surrounded it" and which had "broken down...its true character as a genuine search for democracy and free dom."⁶⁴ In general, he criticized those who compared "the first phase of a new civilization with the mature achievements of an older

⁶²H. J. Laski, "Critic of Stalin," The New Statesman and Nation, XX, (September 14, 1940), 262.

⁶³Ibid., p. 263.

⁶⁴Laski, Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, pp. 265-66.

civilization."⁶⁵

For Laski saw the Russian experiment as the French Revolution of the twentieth century; that is, as a paradigmatic upheaval in which those sensitive to the trend of the age might discern amidst the chaos and strife the patterns and institutions of a new form of social order. Both revolutions had followed upon inefficient misgovernment; both had provoked the fear and hostility of the vested interests everywhere. He felt that in both cases many people tended to count the costs while failing to do justice to the achievements.

Nevertheless, he was critical of those who accepted uncritically all aspects of the Stalin regime. With all dissent from the official line "counter-revolutionary," Soviet politics had become a matter of "mass-purges, mass-exiles, and mass-executions." Despite the pledges of the Constitution of 1936, there was, he admitted, little freedom in Russia. Elections were a farce in which even the "ballot-papers read like a hymn of praise to Stalin." In Laski's view,

I know no justification of these things which seems to me rationally based. It can only be justified for those in whose eyes the Soviet Union can do no wrong. And they can take that view only by applying to the Soviet Union criteria of judgment which they would refuse to apply...to Germany...or Italy...A socialist need not hesitate to admit that there are periods in which the suspension of the rule of law is inevitable; he cannot honourably defend the range and intensity of the bureaucratic dictatorship which Stalin has established... Certainly it is difficult not to feel that...the Soviet dictatorship has for its objective less the achievement of its socialist end than the maintenance of Stalin and his chosen associates in power at all costs...⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 361.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 69; cf. pp. 41, 68.

Laski felt that the purges and trials were a feature of Soviet politics because of the very logic of dictatorship. "The defeated faction must either submit or conspire; the system leaves them no middle path...a breach of discipline [is] an act of treason in the Soviet Union." Soviet politics therefore had an inevitable passionate intensity inimical to freedom. "Everything has to be over-simplified and over-dramatized"; "every leader must be either a hero or a scoundrel."⁶⁷

But Laski felt that critics did not acknowledge that the Soviet system did represent an alternative form of society to capitalism, and that it had considerable achievements in economic planning, education and technological invention to its credit. He believed that only the Russians had succeeded in constructing the basic foundations of a classless society. They had abolished unemployment and organized a welfare state. Most importantly, they had pioneered in "economic democracy":

If the Russian worker may not criticize Stalin, as the British worker can criticize Mr. Churchill or President Roosevelt, he can criticize his foreman or the manager of his factory in a way that is not easily open to the British worker. If his means are narrow, his housing poor, he has no fear of unemployment or of old-age. His health is a national concern; the well-being of his children is the first care of the state...He has felt... the zest of great adventure, the exhilaration that comes to most of us when we feel that we are part of an historic experiment...⁶⁸

The high point of Laski's enthusiasm for the Soviet Union was reached with his wartime essay on Faith, Reason and Civilization, published in 1944. He argued that the capitalist order was in wholesale

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 58, 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 343; cf. pp. 76, 330-331, 342-351, 359-362.

decay and that only a new social philosophy incorporating the insights of the "Soviet Idea" could provide a secular faith capable of saving Western civilization. It seemed to Laski that only the Russian experiment provided a model and new values relevant to the future of democracy. The Russians had found a way, he asserted, to combine a rising standard of material welfare and a sense of social purpose. Only the Soviet road could cope with the key problem of the age: "that technological frustration which is endemic in any system based...upon the private ownership of the means of production and distribution."⁶⁹ Laski felt that a planned economy as drastic as that of the Soviets was needed to bridge the gap between capacity to produce and ability to distribute evidenced by the capitalist nations in the midst of the Great Depression.

Once more he asserted that the failures and crimes of the Stalin regime must be assessed in perspective. "Those who accept the Christian faith," he argued, "do not regard the stains upon its record as disproof of its insight." He pointed out that the Soviet regime had been built amidst chaos and bitter conflict. The stage "where government by the voluntary consent of the governed was possible" had not yet been reached.⁷⁰

Laski was doubtful that Western capitalism could survive the war. He believed that only the "Soviet Idea" could contribute the "mysterious power of renovating values, of renewing the faith of man in himself, at

⁶⁹Laski, Faith, Reason and Civilization, p. 45.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 160-161; cf. p. 157n.

a time when the dark shadows seem, otherwise, likely to close about him." He did not recommend complete emulation of the Russian example; after all, he asserted, Christianity was different in Spain and England. But he did commend the "central ethos" of the Russian experiment in planned social solidarity.⁷¹

When the postwar world developed quite differently than he had anticipated, Laski dropped his emphasis on what the West would learn from Russia. His postwar writings turned on the rather different theme of the need for peaceful coexistence between a resurgent Western capitalist order and a weakened and defensive Soviet Union. He became one of the leading "third force" spokesmen, taking up the task of "interpreting" Russia to the West and the Western outlook to the leadership of the Soviet Union.

Laski's basic assumption was that the Soviet Union did not want war; he felt that a certain degree of understand on the part of the West could guarantee peace. After a visit to Russia in 1946, he reported of Stalin:

His anxiety to avoid war is outstanding; he knows the size of the Russian problem. He knows that it is soluble only on the basis of peace. Though he shares the common view of all Russians that there is world-wide hostility to Communist ideals, he really is anxious to find a modus vivendi with the West...The main thing about which I remained uncertain was how much of the stream of thought and ideas outside Russia penetrates to him through the narrow bottleneck of the Russian Foreign Office.⁷²

Laski tried to explain Soviet actions to the West; he felt that

⁷¹Ibid., p. 64.

⁷²H. J. Laski, "My Impressions of Stalin," New Republic, CXV, (October 14, 1946), 478-479.

most Westerners misunderstood the psychology of the Russians. They were insensitive to Russian perceptions of world events, and to Russian fears about the safety of the Soviet Union. He believed that the West, in its mistaken belief that Russia was bent on world conquest, was contributing to international tension. He held that the "Cold War" was to a great extent the product of avoidable misunderstandings and self-fulfilling prophecies.

Laski coupled his criticisms of Soviet policy with criticisms of the shortcomings of British and American international moves. He tried to deflate the pretentious self-righteousness of Western anti-Communism.⁷³ He was not uncritical of Soviet moves in Eastern Europe; Soviet rhetoric as a contributory factor in the growing "word war"; and the obstructionism of the Soviet delegates at various postwar international conferences. He felt that the key to the postwar tension was not the aggressiveness of the Soviet Union, however, since the initiative rested with the Western powers.

After all, the latter were the stronger party. Laski asked whether the actions of the Western powers did not lend some credence to Soviet fears of attack. He pointed out the hostility of the United States to socialism and communism. He contrasted the "relative complacency with which Great Britain and the United States regard dictatorial regimes in Spain and Latin America with the angry vigilance they display against regimes under Russian influence."⁷⁴ He wondered

⁷³H. J. Laski, "Civil Liberties in the Soviet Union," Ibid., (October 21, 1946), 507-508; "What Democracy Means in Russia," Ibid., (October 28, 1946), 551-552.

⁷⁴H. J. Laski, "Getting On With Russia," Nation, CLXVI, (January 10, 1948), 35.

whether the United States was not interested in capitalism--in association with democracy if possible, but in association with "any governmental form if democracy is unavailable".⁷⁵

Laski did not attempt to minimize the Russian contributions to international conflict, but he advocated greater understanding of the context and background of Russian moves. On occasion, he could be quite critical of Soviet international behavior.⁷⁶ In fact, as time went on he became more and more disenchanted with the international policy of the Soviet bloc. Even so, he suspected the motives of those out to save the world from communism. Hitler had tried to do that. Anti-communism, Laski was well aware, is not necessarily progressive and democratic.

Laski's final attitude on authoritarian socialism in an under-developed country, as represented by the U.S.S.R., was ambivalent. During the last two years of his life he became more and more disenchanted with both the domestic policies and international behavior of the Soviet regime. Although he opposed making anti-communism the centerpiece of Western policy, he became increasingly critical of the Soviet leadership. He was severe in his strictures on the intellectual and cultural repression in the postwar Soviet Union.

Laski's outlook on Russia depended as much upon his understanding of Russian history as upon Marxian theory. He started to emphasize more and more the Russian origins and peculiarities of the Soviet regime as

⁷⁵ Ibid.; pp. 35-36.

⁷⁶ Cf. H. J. Laski, "Information Please, Mr. Molotov," Ibid., CXLII, (June 15, 1946), 710-711.

he became more critical of what he came to regard as the brutal amoralism of the Soviet leadership.⁷⁷ In the year before he died he wrote:

Can anyone read an anniversary speech by Stalin or Molotov, or any argument by Vyshinsky at Lake Success without rubbing his eyes, and remarking how the queer turns of historical fortune have made them, in their different ways, a recognizable combination of Theodore Roosevelt's Manifest Destiny, with the unchallengeable, if simple, complacency of Mr. Podsnap?⁷⁸

Yet he continued to regard the Bolshevik Revolution as having been "necessary" and Russia as in some sense a "socialist state".

IV

Laski's failure to produce a systematic analysis of the relationships between democracy and socialism undoubtedly did nothing to add to the clarity and consistency of his thought. But this is not necessarily a criticism. As a busy political activist, he perhaps naturally addressed issues ad hoc rather than in terms of a systematic discussion. Then, too, many things which seem very clear now were by no means obvious in the 'thirties and 'forties. Many situations where Laski seems clearly wrong in retrospect involved assumptions and predictions which were not absurd at the time.

In spite of all the difficulties, the task of a systematic analysis would have been worthwhile. It would have clarified options, exposed areas of tension, highlighted difficulties and perhaps forced choices where the lack of clarity permitted equivocation. All of this

⁷⁷ H. J. Laski, "Reason and Russia," The New Republic, CXIX, December 6, 1949), 22-24.

⁷⁸ H. J. Laski, Socialism as Internationalism (London: Fabian Publications and Victor Gollancz, 1949), p. 6.

is not to say that it would have solved all the problems. Empirical assessments and prudential judgments of options would have counted for as much as normative preferences. But it would have facilitated the most rational decisions possible under the circumstances. It would have aided rational choice among the perceived options.

If Laski had not been as burdened with other tasks, he would have been in a position to produce the kind of systematic analysis the problem deserves. Such an analysis would have involved distinguishing the major questions posed by the relationship between democracy and socialism. Questions of whether socialism should, must, or can be democratic are separable.

Whether socialism should be democratic is essentially a normative question. It involves decisions as to the moral ideals of socialism, the tracing of their practical implications, and some sort of ranking in order of importance. Efficiency, for example, has long been a component of socialist ideals, but it has to be ranked in comparison with other ideals such as justice, equality and individual freedom.

The question of whether socialism must be democratic involves means-end analysis. Given the ends of socialism, is it possible to achieve them by other than democratic means? Can a society realize socialism without democratic institutions? Or are democratic institutions necessary to secure the results socialists desire?

Whether socialism can be democratic involves two questions or two problems. Is it possible to realize socialism by democratic means? In this context, that question means whether it is possible for a socialist party to conquer power that way. And, secondly, the question

arises as to whether democracy could exist in a socialist society.

A systematic case for democratic socialism built upon the kind of analysis outlined thus would involve positive arguments that socialism should, must, and can be democratic. It would begin by putting forward a synthesis of socialist and democratic ideas as the most desirable form of polity. The next step would be to show how those ends could not be realized without democratic methods and institutions. The most difficult part of the case would be the arguments asserting that such a polity was attainable. It would be necessary to prove both that democracy would not disappear under socialism and that socialists could come to power and govern democratically.

The advantages of a systematic analysis would be the guidelines for decision-making and the systematization of the arguments for democratic socialism. The conclusions, however, could never be more than probable. By this, I mean not only that empirical conclusions are never more than probable, but that the case would rest upon empirical judgments about constantly changing empirical circumstances. The arguments about "can" in particular would be at the mercy of opponents and events, and would require constant reassessment. But even so, a systematic discussion of goals and options would be a valuable aid for decision-making.

Irrespective of whether a systematic analysis might have done anything to prevent it, Laski's position on transition to socialism was at times equivocal. His explicit concern was the preservation of democratic values. And it can be said that his work on this topic was superior to that of others because he was willing to confront genuine

problems posed by severe political conflict rather than withdrawing into idle exhortation about the importance of the "democratic rules of the game."

But granting this, it cannot be denied that Laski's wartime position on transition contained undemocratic elements. He always rejected the idea of minority revolution. His most basic conflict paradigm involved resort to force and extra-constitutional action by the opponents of socialism, not by socialists. His approach was reformist, and he constantly appealed to the ruling class to "reform, it you would preserve."⁷⁹ But his wartime position on transition was a species of educational dictatorship. It included abolition of civil liberties for opponents of socialism, and postulated a harmony of interest between the individual and the state which Laski would earlier have ridiculed.

Laski was very ill during the war, and in mid-war suffered what Kingsley Martin describes as a "nervous breakdown."⁸⁰ He was overburdened with work and political commitments. His wartime writings were produced under great stress, without the leisure for reflection and revision. They are frequently diffuse, repetitious and discursive.

Nevertheless, Laski's mid-war enthusiasm cannot simply be

⁷⁹ It is the weakness of such a position that its constituency is problematic. Reformism must appeal to the rationality of the powerful, or to those with some stake in the status quo. But if stability can be achieved with less change than recommended, the elite will make minimal concessions to justice. If revolution should occur, reformists are described as Cassandras, whose suggestions were farsighted--the warnings of farsighted but politically impotent elements.

⁸⁰ Martin, Harold Laski, pp. 128-129.

attributed to ambiguous writing, although many of his passages are confusing and can be interpreted as either descriptive/predictive or prescriptive. For a time, it must be admitted, Laski came close to articulating a totalitarian political philosophy. Undoubtedly, his illness contributed to his pessimism and depression about the future of democracy, but something less accidental was also involved.

Democracy can be frustrating to intellectuals. It often seems to operate with a lowest common denominator effect, in which the worst pulls down the best. Democracies move slowly, and at times seem not to move at all. Democracy can frustrate intellectuals where it hurts: in their dreams and ideals. The temptation arises to abandon such an unsatisfactory polity for the (in thought) more congenial direct action or educational dictatorship approaches.

The vision of educational dictatorship in practice means the reality of the secret police and the concentration camp. But most Western intellectuals have had no first hand experience of such things. As George Orwell remarked, they are "accustomed to comparative freedom and moderation in public life...totalitarianism is completely incomprehensible to them."⁸¹ The dream of the perfect state can become more and more vivid with every banal remark of a Stanley Baldwin, a Hubert Humphrey or a Robert Stanfield.

⁸¹George Orwell, "Author's Preface to Ukrainian Edition of Animal Farm," (1947), Collected Essays, III, pp. 404-405. He also wrote: "Most European writers...have been obliged to break the law in order to engage in politics at all...One cannot imagine, say, Professor Laski indulging in activities of that kind." See Orwell, "Arthur Koestler," (1944), Collected Essays, III, pp. 234-244, esp. p. 235.

Fortunately, Laski overcame his pessimism regarding the future of Western democracy. With the victory of Labour in 1945, his mood improved and his wartime line of argument disappeared from his works.

As a whole, it should be remembered, Laski's writings were thoroughly democratic in spirit and text. They included some perceptive political assessments. Laski's anxieties regarding transition were not mere neurotic anxiety.⁸² The record of ruling elites peacefully accepting massive social change is spotty, at best.

Laski's position on Soviet Communism also equivocated on the issue of freedom. In the early 1930's he became infatuated with Soviet economic planning. He also came to base his international hopes on the Soviet Union and the Communist-inspired international Popular Front. To an extent, of course, the Communists were (temporarily) on his side as much or more than he was on theirs. But it must be admitted that he was very taken with the Soviet Union.

Laski saw the Soviets as the only nation to have conquered unemployment, and held that they were the key to an international anti-fascist bloc. He put forward Soviet legal and welfare institutions as models for emulation. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that he neither recommended the whole Soviet system nor Western Communism (as did John Strachey, for example). One of Laski's failings was his continual optimism about the emergence of democratic institutions in the U.S.S.R. But he was not uncritical, and in the mid-thirties he indicated his sympathy for Trotsky (but as a person, not for his Fourth

⁸² See Harold Wilson, The Labour Government, 1964-1970 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), pp. 37-38.

International).⁸³

After the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Laski became a vehement critic of the Communist line. In other words, he was no blind fellow-traveller, but was perfectly capable of exercising independent judgment.

Laski's wartime enthusiasm for Russia, however, went much further. Given his pessimism about the future of capitalism, his sense of crisis and his enthusiasm for planning, Laski's interest in Russia was understandable. And Russia was the key to the success of Allied arms. But Laski went too far in idealizing the Stalin regime, and in his wartime writings came close to uncritical apologetics.⁸⁴

Laski's hope was that the dictatorship would wither away. Russia would play a major part in guaranteeing a lasting peace. However, something less rational was also at work. Laski put forward the "Soviet Idea" as the key to a new secular religion.

Arthur Koestler has pointed out the religious quality of much of the enthusiasm for the Soviet Union among Western intellectuals. More precisely, he attributes the interest in the Soviet experiment to a previously existing religious vacuum. In other words, the Soviet Union often became an object of quasi-religious devotion for the emotionally unemployed. The Depression and the rise of fascism shook the intellectuals faith in democratic rationalism. Soviet Communism be-

⁸³See Harold J. Laski, "Trotsky," Men of Turmoil (New York: Minton, Balch, 1935), pp. 123-129; Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 17, 267.

⁸⁴Cf. Louis Fischer, "Laski Should Know Better," Common Sense, VIII, (August, 1944), 289-291.

came for many a substitute religion. Laski was not alone.⁸⁵ After the war, however, his enthusiasm waned. He never gave up his hope that peaceful coexistence would be possible. But his interest in the Soviet Union as a model society turned to sceptical melancholy.

It would be too much to say that nothing of value can be learned by socialists from authoritarian systems. After all, social reformers all over the world drew inspiration and practical suggestions from Imperial Germany. But democratic socialists ought to remember their liberal and democratic values when tempted to join in celebration of the virtues of the latest foreign utopia.

In summary, it can be said that Laski was a democratic socialist. He occasionally deviated from that position, but by and large consistently supported democratic solutions to the problems of advanced capitalist society. He never developed a systematic case for democratic socialism, but generally took that position in responding to the major political issues of his time.

⁸⁵ See Arthur Koestler, The Yogi and the Commissar (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 109-121 (first published in 1945). At times, Laski came close to what George Orwell later dubbed "the theory of catastrophic gradualism": "nothing is ever achieved without bloodshed, lies, tyranny and injustice, but on the other hand no considerable change for the better is to be expected as a result of even the greatest upheaval." See Orwell, "Catastrophic Gradualism," (1945), Collected Essays, IV, pp. 15-19.

CHAPTER V

Laski was very sensitive to the contextual aspect of political theory. He gave expression to this attitude on numerous occasions. "No theory of the state is ever intelligible save in the context of its time. What men think about the state is always the outcome of the experience in which they are immersed."¹ The political theorist typically has "externalized his autobiography into a programme and criterion of reality."² It is nevertheless possible to raise questions concerning the relevance of a Laskian democratic socialism today. At stake, of course, are matters both of the adequacy of Laski's conceptions and empirical problems of the continuity of experience.

The discussion of Laski's immanent critique of liberalism in Chapter II took up the contemporary implications of his critique of liberal democratic theory and practice. There remains the task of contrasting a Laskian liberal socialism with the other contemporary varieties of socialist thought. A comprehensive discussion of Harold Laski's philosophy of democratic socialism implies a discussion of the merits of liberal socialism as contrasted with the other current options on the Left.

¹Laski, A Grammar of Politics, p. i.

²Laski, The State in Theory and Practice, p. 18.

The Left in history has ordinarily been anything but a monolithic and well organized opposition to capitalism. In the nineteenth century, numerous ideologies contended for supremacy, and even in its heyday Orthodox Marxism never achieved anything like a complete hegemony in socialist political thought.³ An exhaustive survey (let alone critique or refutation) of existing trends in socialist thought covering any time period is a formidable task. It is quite possible, however, to sketch the major schools of socialist thought of a period and subject them to a reasonable critique at the level of major assumptions.

That is the procedure adopted in this chapter with regard to the major schools of socialist thought in the West since 1945. It is concerned with Social Democracy, Authoritarian Leftism and New Leftism. The first part of each section sketches the major trends and subdivisions of each school of thought since 1945; the latter part of each section develops a brief evaluation from the perspective of liberal socialism. While the arguments presented in these critical reflections often draw upon Laski's thought, these sections are not a speculative attempt to sketch what Laski might have made of the contemporary Left scene. I have put forward my own arguments: hopefully, in the spirit of Harold Laski.

I

In the inter-war years, Social Democracy stood for evolutionary democratic socialism. Whether or not still formally committed to

³Cf. G. D. H. Cole, The Second International 2v. (London: Macmillan, 1956).

Marxism, the parties of the Labour and Socialist International had in effect adopted the "revisionism" of the right-wing of pre-1914 socialism. This meant a "national" orientation, looking to the gradual transformation of capitalism into socialism by parliamentary methods. Belief in the coming collapse of capitalism was abandoned or relegated to programmatic rhetoric. The actual practice of the socialist parties was incremental reformism. The assumption, however, was that in the long run the reforms would cumulatively add up to socialism. A series of majority socialist governments would thus legislate capitalism out of existence. The lapses and minimal accomplishments of Social Democratic governments were explained away as the result of minority governments or pressing immediate tasks, such as preventing Communist revolution.⁴

In the aftermath of World War II, the future of Social Democracy seemed bright. The majority British Labour Government, the position of the French Socialists, and the growth of the CCF in Canada were among the hopeful signs pointed to by Social Democrats. By 1950, this euphoric mood had dissolved.

The growth curve of Social Democratic electoral politics did not continue its upward trend. Social Democrats on the Continent had to compete with the Communists in their working class constituencies, while the middle classes showed surprising resistance to socialist appeals. In Britain, the Labour Party enacted much of its programme, but then

⁴On the inter-war years, see Adolf Sturmthal, The Tragedy of European Labor, 1918-1939 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943). The classic source of "revisionism" is Eduard Bernstein, Evolutionary Socialism (New York: Schocken, 1962), first published in 1899 in German.

seemed to run out of steam. Nationalization did not seem to make as much difference as socialists had long assumed and hoped.⁵ With massive American aid, the prospects of capitalism first improved and then appeared to promise something like prosperity.

The development of the Cold War put Europe and Social Democracy in the middle. With few exceptions, the latter chose the "West" and became active opponents of the Communists. Ernest Bevin often surpassed American diplomats in his scepticism of and hostility toward presumed Soviet intentions. Under the circumstances, "Marxism" was generally abandoned to the Communists; but even where a formal commitment remained (e.g., France), Marxist thought did not actually guide the practical politics of the party. The key-note of Social Democracy became political "realism".

A new current of "revisionism" arose within the Social Democratic parties. It was once again the party "ideology" which was declared in need of revision, but this time it was more than "Marxism" which was declared obsolete. The new revisionists demanded the abandonment of any commitment to classical socialism. They declared that capitalism had solved its "inherent contradictions", that laissez-faire competitive capitalism had been succeeded by managed or organized capitalism, capable of an indefinite life-span due to the utilization of Keynesian techniques. While emphasizing the traditional socialist goal of "equality" (indeed, almost to the exclusion of other traditional

⁵On the mood in Britain after the end of the 1945 Labour Government, see R. H. S. Crossman, ed. The New Fabian Essays (London: Turnstile Press, 1952).

socialist aims), the new revisionists declared that substantial progress had already been made and that residual dimensions of the problem could be eliminated by extension of the welfare state.⁶

In line with the electoral difficulties of the Social Democrats, rhetoric about the "class struggle" was declared obsolete and nationalization planks were criticized as dogmatic survivals inhibiting appeals to "floating" middle class voters.⁷

Classical socialism was declared obsolete. A classless society was declared a utopian aim in an advanced industrial nation. Nationalization was rejected as unnecessary to economic prosperity, frequently bureaucratic and inefficient, and a potential threat to freedom by way of concentrating too much power in the state. A residual commitment to empirical collectivism was frequently retained by suggesting that certain specific industries might benefit from government ownership. But the traditional socialist aim of the collective ownership and control of the

⁶For typical works of the new revisionism, consult C. A. R. Crosland, The Future of Socialism (London: Constable, 1956); John Strachey, Contemporary Capitalism (New York: Random House, 1956); Douglas Jay, Socialism in the New Society (London: Longmans, 1963); Pierre Mendes-France, A Modern French Republic (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963); and Norman Thomas, Socialism Reexamined (New York: Norton, 1963).

⁷On the electoral issue in Britain, see Mark Abrams and Richard Rose, Must Labour Lose? (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960). H. Stuart Hughes, "The Socialist Dilemma," An Approach to Peace (New York: Atheneum, 1962), pp. 101-116, surveys the other Social Democratic parties.

means of production and distribution was definitely rejected.⁸

Social Democracy discovered the virtues of planned capitalism. It became a technocratic reform party. The British Labour Party discovered "national" responsibilities transcending its "class" constituency. The Social Democratic argument became the assertion that socialist planning would result in more efficient management of the capitalist system. Planning was defended as necessary to "economic growth".

All of this was to be presented to the voters by dynamic new leaders, modelling themselves after the American "Kennedy style". Brandt, Wilson and their counterparts would lead a new moderate Social Democracy to power.

To the new revisionists, the welfare state or "mixed economy" had replaced socialism as the goal of the party. The new Social Democratic programmes combined technocratic themes, plans for government encouragement of economic growth, and programmes to extend the social services. In effect, Social Democracy had become committed to the management of the capitalist system in the interests (hopefully) of the

⁸On revisionism in the British Labour Party, see Stephen Haseler, The Gaitskellites: Revisionism in the BLP, 1951-1964 (London: Macmillan, 1969). For parallel developments on the Continent, see Douglas A. Chalmers, The Social Democratic Party: From Working Class Movement to Modern Political Party (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); Kurt L. Shell, The Transformation of Austrian Socialism (New York: State University of New York, 1962); and Harvey G. Simmons, French Socialists in Search of a Role, 1956-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970). On the Canadian case, see Leo Zakuta, A Protest Movement Becalmed (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964).

people.⁹

Having abandoned classical socialism as utopian and, in any case, unpopular with voters, the Social Democrats trusted to the natural course of party competition to bring them to power. When they did achieve power, they did little or nothing which could be considered specifically "socialist". The Swedish Social Democrats, long in governmental office, did nothing to disturb the "mixed economy". The Brandt and Wilson governments finally realized not socialism, but Eduard Bernstein's aim. The movement became everything, the goal nothing.

Not all Social Democrats were satisfied with revisionism. According to H. Stuart Hughes, writing in 1960, "Most left Socialists are unwilling to discard the old battle cries of nationalization and class warfare. But they have difficulty explaining why they feel that way."¹⁰ Equally influenced by Keynesianism, they had few programmatic ideas, apart from a commitment to militant opposition to capitalism and imperialism. They no longer expected the system to collapse. Most left-wing writing confined itself to documenting the persistence of poverty in the welfare state and discussing the threat of nuclear war.¹¹

⁹For typical examples, see the British programmes: Industry and Society (London: Transport House, 1957) and Signposts for the Sixties (London: Transport House, 1961). Harold Wilson expounded his own views in The Relevance of British Socialism (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964). Paul Foot provides a stimulating critique in The Politics of Harold Wilson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

¹⁰H. Stuart Hughes, An Approach to Peace, p. 111.

¹¹Cf. Norman Mackenzie, ed. Conviction (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1959).

An exception to the revisionist trend of the 1950's was R. H. S. Crossman. He was not so sure that capitalism had solved all its economic difficulties, and he was also quite critical of the quality of life in advanced capitalist society. Drawing upon the ideas of John Kenneth Galbraith, he applied the "private affluence, public squalor" theme to British life. For these sentiments he was criticized by Douglas Jay, one of the leading revisionists, as an "unrepentant Marxist". Crossman was unconvinced that the business cycle had been completely mastered, and he believed that new problems were emerging which could not be handled by simple extension of the welfare state. He did not, however, offer a comprehensive programmatic alternative to revisionism.¹²

There remained minorities in the Social Democratic parties committed to more than the welfare state, but the machinery and majorities became committed to revisionism. Although the minorities were larger in some parties (e.g. France, Italy), nowhere did they constitute a potential majority. In Great Britain, the Labour Left, in the view of many observers, steadily declined as a potential alternative leadership.¹³

In the late 1960's there was a resurgence of militancy in many of the Social Democratic parties. In Canada, for example, the "Waffle" movement arose within the New Democratic Party. It focussed upon American economic and cultural penetration of Canada, and developed an analysis of American imperialism putting forward traditional socialism

¹²See his papers collected in The Politics of Socialism (New York: Atheneum, 1965).

¹³See R. Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, pp. 350-377, and Paul Foot, "Parliamentary Socialism," in Nigel Harris and John Palmer, eds. World Crisis (London: Hutchinson, 1971), pp. 76-114.

as the recommended solution. By the early 1970's, the faction was in the process of being expelled or disaffiliating from the N.D.P., and at present its prospects are uncertain.¹⁴

The continuity of classical revisionism, inter-war Social Democracy and post-1945 democratic socialism lies in their acceptance of a generally benign image of capitalism along with an optimistic assessment of its prospects. Social Democrats have continually narrowed the gap between ideal and reality by revising their ideals.

The objections to Social Democracy fall into three different categories. From the standpoint of liberal socialism, there are ethical objections, economic criticisms, and political reservations. At the level of principles, the case is simply that modern revisionism has abandoned the traditional principles of socialism. Cooperation and democratic control have been abandoned entirely, and equality re-defined as equality of opportunity. It has become very difficult to distinguish Social Democracy from ordinary liberalism. Recently Roy Jenkins, a leading 1950's revisionist, even repudiated equality as an aim or goal value, because of its alleged incompatibility with economic growth.¹⁵

Electoral rhetoric aside, serious socialists have long been aware of potential conflicts between their various aims. The realization that humanitarian objectives might not be compatible with full production or the highest growth rate is not a new discovery. To drive the point

¹⁴The declaration "For an Independent Socialist Canada" is reprinted in Bryan Finnigan and Cy Gonick, eds. Making It: The Canadian Dream (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), pp. 587-593.

¹⁵"The Radical Creed of a Civilized Man," Guardian (British), July 21, 1969.

home: what socialist ever suggested the desirability of the ten hour day in order to secure full production? While an economy of abundance had long been a socialist aim, it was always included among a set of values: democracy, cooperation, security, equality, and so on. The Left socialist suspicion that the revisionists have simply abandoned socialism for managerialism is generally true.

There are several economic objections to Social Democracy. Exception may be taken to the contention that capitalism has by and large solved its economic problems. Unemployment, poverty, and insecurity have not been abolished--though the accomplishments of the welfare state need not be denied or minimized.¹⁶ Inflation is obviously a phenomenon the capitalist governments have been unable or unwilling to cope with. In general, there is no reason to believe that the problem of the business cycle has been completely mastered.

There is evidence that the Keynesianism of the capitalist governments has been more rhetorical than real. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that the Social Democratic governments have been unable to control their economies through fiscal and regulatory measures alone. Without even mentioning nationalization, there has been little or no Social Democratic enthusiasm about less drastic measures, such as price and wage controls. In other words, Social Democracy in power tends to behave much as any capitalist government would. It claims credit for upturns and applies stopgap measures to problems. In the face of massive

¹⁶ See Michael Harrington, Toward a Democratic Left (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Ian Adams, et al., The Real Poverty Report (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig, 1971); and Howard Sherman, Radical Political Economy (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

economic difficulties, the Wilson Governments of 1964-1970 continually avoided the imposition of serious controls on the British economy.

Nationalization was never part of the socialist programme because socialists believed that it would be desirable under all circumstances. Engels explicitly attacked some forms of nationalization or public ownership as antithetical to socialist aims.¹⁷ Existing experiments in nationalization in the Western economies have not been part of concerted efforts to realize socialism. They have been administered under conventional bureaucratic arrangements and evaluated by criteria of efficiency and market value. The experiments have not been able to draw upon non-economic motives available in such circumstances.

Social Democrats have abandoned nationalization because they have abandoned socialism. There are many specific circumstances in which nationalization makes sense on narrowly economic grounds. But in a broader sense, nationalization is an important tool of economic development even in the advanced capitalist nations. It is doubtful whether Canada will ever be able to shake off American economic domination and ensure autonomous economic development without substantial nationalization. At a minimum, this would involve state ownership of basic natural resources. In addition, there are the political reasons for nationalization as an aspect of limiting the economic and political power of the capitalist class.

Social Democracy has never understood capitalism as a system of

¹⁷See Lewis Feuer, ed. Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy (New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1959), pp. 102-103.

power. In consequence, Social Democratic governments have frequently run aground on the incompatibility of their aims with the effective management of the capitalist system. Without drastic limitations on the economic and political power of the capitalist class, reforms and regulatory schemes have continually proven ineffective. With the abandonment of Orthodox Marxism, Social Democracy can no longer rely upon "economist" optimism about the inevitable decline of capitalist power.

Social Democrats have long justified their lack of enthusiasm for socialism on short-term electoral considerations. The most damaging thing about this regularly invoked extenuating circumstance is that the Social Democrats are themselves a major contributory cause. The Social Democratic parties have rarely done much in the area of political education of voters in the basic elements of understanding of the issue of capitalism and socialism. Surely, if the major left-wing party in a political system is not interested in socialist education, it is unreasonable to expect interest on the part of the mass electorate.

II

Authoritarian leftism represents a current in socialist thought since 1945 which has been marginal in terms of party orientation but nevertheless quite influential among party activists, intellectuals and sympathizers. It involves sympathy with leftist dictatorships of the Soviet bloc and/or the Third World, and belief in the possibility of transition to socialism by non-democratic means. While it is certainly influenced by Marxism-Leninism, authoritarian Leftism is not the same thing as Communism. Authoritarian Leftists are not Communists

and would probably be little inclined to join the Communist Party, though they are usually quite willing to work with it on limited objectives. Left authoritarians rarely believe in dialectical materialism and usually reject the Leninist concept of the party--at least as applied to their own activities.

The essence of authoritarian leftism is "fellow travelling" with the various left dictatorships around the world. State planning and nationalization are seen as the essence of socialism, which is believed to be the next stage of world history. Capitalism is identified with war, fascism and imperialism. In the Cold War years, authoritarian leftists quite naturally took the side of the Soviet Union, seen as the innocent victim of capitalist encirclement.

The background of this trend of thought goes back in time to the "fellow travellers" of the 1920's and 1930's: those intellectuals in the Western democracies who sympathized with the "Soviet experiment" and defended the Stalin regime against hostile criticism. This group was especially cultivated, of course, by the Communist International, and never more so than after the adoption of the "Popular Front" line by the Seventh World Congress in 1935. This was done to rally all possible support for Soviet foreign policy in its quest for allies against German aggression.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact shattered the Popular Front movement completely, but during World War II many former supporters returned to the fold. With sympathy for the Soviet Union official government policy

¹⁸ See David Caute, The Fellow-Travellers (New York: Macmillan, 1973) and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 319-499.

in Great Britain and the United States, there was vast recruiting of new innocents under the guise of campaigns for the Second Front, Red Army Relief, and so on. Many academics and rank-and-file socialists became fellow travellers of Soviet foreign policy and instruments of the "front" organizations controlled and manipulated by the Communist parties. The Cold War cut into the ranks of this group badly, but a number of influential intellectuals in the democracies persisted in their choice of the "East" throughout the late forties and fifties.

Because of its nature, marginal and yet amorphous, this is a difficult trend of thought to characterize. It is perhaps best epitomized by various circles or groups in the advanced capitalist societies. In the United States, there is the group around the Monthly Review, edited since 1949 by Paul Sweezy, Leo Huberman, and Harry Magdoff. Among its contributors have been A. K. Davis, I. F. Stone, Andre Gunder Frank, and Harvey O'Connor, the economist Paul Baran, and Scott Nearing. This group has analyzed American politics in terms of imperialism and from the first viewed the United States as responsible for the Cold War.¹⁹

A main theme of these writers is imperialism as the major determinant of American policy. The United States is seen as having succeeded Britain as the leader of the imperialist bloc after 1945. Imperialism is defined primarily in economic terms: markets, investment opportunities and resources. These writers argue that the advanced

¹⁹See I. F. Stone, The Hidden History of the Cold War (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1953); J. P. Morray, From Yalta to Disarmament (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959); and D. F. Fleming, The Cold War and Its Origins (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

capitalist societies are responsible for the misery and underdevelopment of the Third World nations. Indeed, it is argued that the United States has been actively engaged in preventing development in the Third World in the interest of its own markets and its feudal-military allies in the backward nations.²⁰

In France, Jean Paul Sartre and the group around Les Temps Moderne tried to build a political movement in the late 1940's. It was intended to be independent of both the Socialist and Communist parties, though its orientation was closer to the latter than the former. The group took the Soviet side in the Cold War and consistently attacked American imperialism as responsible for the conflict. The philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote a critique of Arthur Koestler which put forward a defence of the Soviet purge trials in the late 1930's.²¹

Sartre looked to the Communists because to him they represented the workers: the wave of the future. The Communists did not reciprocate his sympathy, though their antipathy varied from time to time. Sartre did not become a Communist. He took up the task of reinvigorating Marxist thought; eventually, he developed a synthesis of Marxism and existentialism. Many observers suggested that he had left existentialism behind in his reinterpretation of Marxism; in any case, he was still

²⁰The opening shot was Paul Baran, The Political Economy of Growth (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1957). See also Pierre Jalle, The Pillage of the Third World (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970); and Robert I. Rhodes, ed. Imperialism and Underdevelopment (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

²¹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Humanism and Terror, tr. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). First published in 1947.

far from "dialectical materialism".²²

In England, Isaac Deutscher was a prominent representative of left authoritarianism. He provided an analysis of Soviet politics bolstering the main conclusions of the school of thought. Interpreting socialism as the nationalization of the means of production and distribution, he apologized for Stalinism on account of its success in "building socialism" in the U.S.S.R.²³ The essence of his position was his argument that Stalinism was "inevitable" in Soviet development. In arguments similar to those of E. H. Carr,²⁴ Deutscher excused the excesses of Stalinism as the necessary consequences of industrialization and the inevitable working out of supposed "laws" of revolution. To him, Stalinism was the Thermidor phase of Soviet development.

For Deutscher, the development of the Soviet Union as a great power validates the course of Soviet development. In effect, he propounded an economic determinist version of the "big battalion" theory of history. Yet he was constantly arguing that liberalization was imminent in the Soviet bloc and that the Soviet Union was on the verge of abolishing or drastically reducing its limitations on personal freedom.

²² Jean Paul Sartre, Search for a Method, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York: Knopf, 1963). George Lichtheim provides a critique in The Concept of Ideology (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 289-315.

²³ See Isaac Deutscher, Stalin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966); The Prophet Unarmed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); and The Prophet Outcast (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963). Julius Jacobson provides a severe critique in "Isaac Deutscher: Anatomy of an Apologist," in Julius Jacobson, ed. Soviet Communism and the Socialist Vision (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1972), pp. 86-162.

²⁴ E. H. Carr, A History of Soviet Russia 9v. (London: Macmillan, 1950-1969).

In recent years, authoritarian leftists have shifted their allegiance from Soviet Russia to the Maoist regime in China. After Hungary, the Soviet star dimmed somewhat among Western intellectuals. The Soviets settled down to a pattern of accommodation with the United States. To many, the Russian regime began to seem bureaucratic and stodgy. As the Sino-Soviet rift developed and the Chinese began to take a more and more militant rhetorical line, left authoritarians became more and more enthusiastic. The "Cultural Revolution" further increased Maoist prestige with this group. To some extent, Cuba and other Third World dictatorships also inherited the "fellow travellers" enthusiasm for authoritarian collectivism.²⁵

The authoritarian left group has for the most part written off transition to socialism in the advanced industrial countries. Many feel that American capitalism will collapse only after peasant revolutions have undermined its overseas empire. Paul Sweezy has put forward an empirical view of the American working class not much different than that of S. M. Lipset.²⁶ This view sees the working class as "bought off" by the super-profits of imperialism.

For authoritarian leftism, capitalism is the worst enemy mankind faces in the Twentieth Century. Socialism and the planned economy

²⁵ See Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1960); Sweezy and Huberman Socialism in Cuba (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969); William Hinton, Fanshen (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967); and E. L. Wheelwright and Bruce Macfarland, The Chinese Road to Socialism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

²⁶ Paul Sweezy, "Workers and the Third World," in George Fischer, ed. The Revival of American Socialism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). pp. 154-168.

represent the solution to the problems of war, fascism and imperialism resulting from the maneuvers of capitalism in decay. Only leftist dictatorship, in this view, can foster development in the backward nations. The main enemy of progress is American capitalism, and anything which will frustrate the plans of American imperialism or limit U.S. influence is plainly desirable.

The authoritarian leftist sees the left dictatorships as pre-viewing the collectivist future of mankind. Their governments have eliminated capitalism and are engaged in development policies in the interests of the workers and peasants. Community values have replaced "bourgeois individualism" and a "new man" is developing, fit to live in the collectivist world of the future. Dictatorship is merely a transitional phenomenon, occasioned by lingering bourgeois remnants and the external menace of world capitalism and imperialism. The rule of one party is a necessary feature of the regime because of the circumstances noted, and is acceptable since the party represents the "objective" interests of the vast majority of the people.

The root error of authoritarian leftism is its vastly oversimplified paradigm of our time as simply the last stage of the conflict between capitalism and socialism. Manipulating Marxian categories within the demands of reassurance for their commitments to the various leftist dictatorships, authoritarian leftists have produced caricatures of Marxism. Capitalism is not the sole or even the major cause of war, fascism or imperialism in the sense that claim is advanced by left authoritarians. Socialism does not exist in the Soviet bloc or the Third World dictatorships. And the struggle between democracy and dictatorship--which is not the same thing as the conflict

between East and West--cannot be reduced to the issue of capitalism or socialism.

Imperialism is a complex phenomenon, and economic interests certainly play a part. But the Soviet Union has dominated other nations, and it is merely authoritarian leftist apologetics to insist that the U.S.S.R. cannot be imperialist because imperialism--by definition--is the highest stage of capitalism. The United States has had imperial relations with much of Latin America, but it is much more dubious to explain American foreign policy in the Orient in those terms. In sum, capitalism is not necessary for imperialism and capitalist countries do things for other reasons than imperialism. It is also a vast oversimplification to paint the United States as the main obstacle to Third World economic development.²⁷

Authoritarian Leftism is wrong in its estimate of the nations of the Soviet bloc and the Third World dictatorships as socialist. Socialism means both the economic and political realization of democracy. If freedom and equality are limited in the advanced capitalist societies, neither can exist under a totalitarian dictatorship. The excuses given for the existence of dictatorship in terms of the designs of the imperialist bloc are of limited validity. If there are cases on record like Guatemala, the record will not bear the Soviet or left authoritarian version of events. The Cold War, for example, developed out of Stalin's determination to control Eastern Europe and he would have been happy to extend his totalitarian rule even more if the Western

²⁷For a good introduction to these issues, see George Lichtheim, Imperialism (New York: Praeger, 1971).

powers had not resisted.²⁸

Authoritarian leftism represents a catastrophic underestimation of the importance of liberal democratic institutions and values. Such forms of democracy as multiple political parties, civil liberties and due process are indispensable guarantees of freedom and equality. They may have developed in the context of the rise of the bourgeoisie to state power, but they transcend that context in importance and relevance. Liberal democratic means are essential both in the struggle for socialism and in any genuinely socialist society.

The most important reasons for socialist adherence to democratic methods on the road to power hinge on the negative consequences likely to follow from not doing so. If socialists are able to command a majority, then there is no need to rule by dictatorship. If they cannot command a majority or near majority, then socialist government could rule only by force and, ultimately, terror. Under the circumstances, there could be no chance of realizing socialism. And given the experience of mankind with dictatorship in the twentieth century, the possibilities of degeneration are appalling. No one has come forward with any realistic safeguards against the totalitarian potential of one party dictatorship.

Democratic institutions are necessary in a socialist society because without them it would be impossible either to check unlimited power or provide for any kind of genuine popular control of government.

²⁸See Henry M. Pachter, "Historical Revisionism and the Cold War," Dissent, XV, (November-December, 1968), 505-518; and John L. Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

Without popular control and legitimate opportunities for the expression of grievance, it is meaningless to speak of representative government. Indeed, given the necessary centralization of power under socialism, it is arguable that limitations and safeguards are more necessary under socialism than in a capitalist society. Without democracy, the workers cannot rule and it is hypocrisy to speak of the government as "representing" their interests.

Without liberal democratic forms, a regime will at best represent the conceptions and interests of the ruling party--or the dominant faction thereof. Government of the people, by the party, in the interest of the elite. Underlying much of the nonsense about "representative dictatorship" is the assumption that significant conflicts of interest and policy disappear under socialism. Brandishing Marxian slogans, left authoritarians declare that "contradictions" are impossible in a socialist society. Except for a few malcontent remnants of the old regime, it is assumed that there will be harmony of interest between leaders, cliques, factions and regions.

Obviously, this is a dubious assumption. All evidence from history and existing leftist regimes indicates the persistence of "contradictions" in utopian communities.²⁹ Differentials in income and status would persist under socialism; and the psychological variables of conflict are unlikely to wither away. Interpersonal rivalries are not abolished by the nationalization of the means of production and dis-

²⁹On conflicts in existing left-wing societies, see Robert S. Elegant, Mao's Great Revolution (Cleveland: World Publishing Co, 1971) and Svetozar Stojanovic, Between Ideals and Reality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

tribution. At a policy level, there would remain plenty of room for divergence over cultural, religious, military and international affairs matters even if all economic causes of conflict were removed.

Democratic institutions are necessary to provide legitimate procedures for settling conflicts, determining policies and choosing leaders. There must be institutional means for the presentation of alternatives and the expression of grievances. Without democratic procedures, the type of despotism characteristic of Stalin's Russia must be an ever-present threat. Intellectual and cultural conformism, historical falsification, and economic exploitation are additional characteristics of totalitarianism which would likely accompany political despotism.

Authoritarian leftism erects one of the means of socialism--a nationalized economy--into a fetish to be cherished without reference to context or consequences. Planning per se is idealized without careful study of the concrete power relations within which it occurs. Regimes displaying the proper form are taken on trust and given latitude for error and corruption unlikely to be extended to any capitalist government.

Lastly, left authoritarianism represents an impoverished attitude toward life. A socialism which does not prize intellectual freedom, cultural pluralism, artistic freedom and freedom of scientific inquiry is not worth having. Granted that one cannot pursue democratic channels where they do not exist and that the problems of underdevelopment are pressing, that does not excuse the attitudes of authoritarian leftists that such values are bourgeois or trivial. Cultural backwardness, like economic backwardness, ought to occasion regret, not

indiscriminate admiration for totalitarian social discipline.

III

The roots of the present New Left go back to the invasion of Hungary by Soviet troops in 1956. From the disillusioned former Communists in Britain and the unaffiliated pacifist Left, there developed groups around two journals, the New Reasoner and Universities and Left Review. Eventually, these groups merged and the magazine New Left Review was started. There was no "line", and the common purpose of most of those engaged was to rethink the basic problems of socialist theory. Reacting against both revisionism and Stalinism, the individuals comprising the New Left focused on the inadequacies of the welfare state, the cultural foundations of socialism, and the problem of world peace. Much of their critical thrust was directed against the "NATO mentality" of the Social Democratic intelligentsia.³⁰

The American sociologist C. Wright Mills gave the group an international introduction in his "Open Letter to the New Left" published in 1960. Rejecting both the "end of ideology" viewpoint and Stalinism as ideological rationalizations of the major power blocs, Mills proclaimed the need for a new left committed to social change in the advanced industrial countries and international detente with the Communist bloc.³¹ He argued that traditional leftist dogmas had to be abandoned. While stressing the persistence of "contradictions" in the

³⁰ See E. P. Thompson, ed. Out of Apathy, op. cit.

³¹ C. Wright Mills, "The New Left," in I. L. Horowitz, ed., Power Politics and People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 247-259.

advanced capitalist societies, he insisted that the working classes were unlikely to do much. Going beyond Marxism, he identified intellectuals and students as the most probable base for political organization.

Mills' essay did not call a political movement into existence. But it was taken up by a slowly developing coalition of student activists in the United States. From the civil rights movement, the peace movement, and the Berkeley student rebellion of 1964, there developed a loose grouping of young radicals. Eventually, the Students for a Democratic Society emerged as the most prominent organization on the student Left, though it never really dominated the scene. The Vietnam escalation gave the "movement" an issue around which to organize and by 1966 commentators and the media were busy discussing the emergence of the New Left. Never dominated by one national organization, and frequently credited or criticized for any and all student political developments, the New Left consisted of a great number of local groups concerned with poverty, racial injustice and war.³²

The American New Left was a very loose coalition of different orientations, sharing little more than a common hostility to the status quo. Most people were rather alienated from the Old Left, both Social Democratic and Communist, because they distrusted the authoritarianism

³²On the early days, see Jack Newfield, A Prophetic Minority (New York: New American Library, 1966); Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, eds. The New Radicals (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); and Kirkpatrick Sale, SDS (New York: Random House, 1973). A good documentary history is to be found in Massimo Teodori, ed. The New Left (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

of its organizations and the dogmatic scholasticism of the ideological disputes. The New Leftists emphasized action: community organizing, demonstrations, and teach-ins.

While repudiating anti-Communism and willing to work with the Communists on specific issues, most New Leftists distrusted them. Opposed to authoritarianism, they were sympathetic to anarchist ideas. They stressed the importance of what they called "participatory democracy" and tried to realize it in their organizations. There were few formal leaders, little formal structure, and a great effort to operate by voluntary consensus.

The main enemy of the New Leftists was what they called "corporate liberalism". The Johnson Administration talked humanitarianism and progress while dropping bombs on civilians in Asia. Liberalism was the main target of the New Left because liberal government officials were running the institutions and pursuing the policies the New Left was dedicated to overthrowing.

After its efforts had less success than anticipated in changing policies and institutions, a certain radicalization set in. On the tactical level, community organization and demonstrations were replaced by civil disobedience, draft resistance and, finally, "confrontation tactics" which included the student general strike and the occupation of buildings.

A certain intellectual escalation also occurred. At first, most New Leftists took their social theory from such social critics as Paul Goodman and C. Wright Mills. Then there was a certain degree of interest in Herbert Marcuse and his translation of the conclusions of the

Frankfurt School of Sociology for the English-speaking world.³³ The works of Marxist writers like Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff had a period of influence. Finally, the decade of the sixties ended with a widespread popularity of Maoism.

At the end of the decade the SDS split between its Maoist wing and those student militants committed to urban guerilla warfare and known as "Weathermen". By 1970, SDS had almost ceased to exist. Local groups, journals and a public of former activists existed, but no organized "movement".³⁴

The American New Left began as a revolt against the organizational rigidities and traditional dogmas of the Old Left. With the renewed popularity of Marxism, and particularly Maoism, in the late sixties, New Left thought slipped back into the well-worn grooves of traditional leftist debate. In their search for a systematic theory to explain their lack of success and the persistence of the Vietnam War, the radicalized New Left found Marxian theory made to order. As a result, by the early 1970's the United States could present technical contributions to Marxist debate capable of matching the scholasticism of anything available on the Continent.³⁵

³³Cf. Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); and Alasdair MacIntyre, Herbert Marcuse (New York: The Viking Press, 1970).

³⁴See Kirkpatrick Sale, SDS, op. cit. On the later New Left, Cf. Carl Oglesby, ed. The New Left Reader (New York: Grove Press, 1969) and Arthur Lothstein, ed. All We Are Saying (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1970).

³⁵See the journal Telos or Karl Klare and Dick Howard, eds. The Unknown Dimension (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

At present, the main split seems to be between those of a Maoist persuasion and those former New Leftists still faithful to many of the original impulses. This is not a matter of degree of radicalism, but a dispute over constituency and political style. The alternatives are the student constituency "participatory democracy" style and the Maoist worker-oriented centralized party approach. The former group still hopes for a participatory, decentralized approach to humanist socialism.³⁶

In France in 1968, the students played a major part in the May events. They raised many of the same "qualitative" issues which have concerned American students, and showed the same generational critique of the Old Left. Given the political traditions of France, Marxism played a more central role throughout. And sectarian Marxist groups had much more influence, as did veteran left-wing intellectuals like Jean Paul Sartre. But the interest displayed by American students in the French events and the interest in the writings of the French student left, as well as the similarity of many concerns, indicate the extent to which the French New Left is part of an international movement.

In Germany, where revisionism triumphed in the Social Democratic Party, the early 1960's saw a revival of radicalism among the young. The German SDS was forced to separate from the senior party because the latter considered many of the members of the former to be

³⁶ See Paul Breines, "From Guru to Spectre: Marcuse and the Implosion of the Movement," in Paul Breines, ed. Critical Interruptions (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), pp. 1-21; and Staughton Lynd and Gar Alperovitz, Strategy and Program (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

Communists. Japan has had a "New Left" as well, though in numerical terms most young Japanese Leftists belonged to the official youth organizations of the senior political parties. In other words, there are trends in most countries resembling the "New Left" even if there is no explicit membership or identification.³⁷

The British New Left, in some sense the parent of the international movement, underwent changes not dissimilar to the American experience. As student radicalism developed in the 1960's, a certain escalation of rhetoric and tactics took place. The London School of Economics and other educational institutions saw student demonstrations similar to those on American campuses. Anti-Vietnam protests also followed American patterns. A number of sectarian leftist groups were active in competing for the same marginal constituency.³⁸

The New Left Review underwent changes in orientation similar to the pattern of change in American New Left thought. Early 1960's issues contained cultural criticism, statistical critiques of Social Democratic claims about equality and the welfare state, and debunking essays on the complacent academic scholarship of the 1950's. By the later part of the decade, the magazine had graduated to discussions of Marxist theory, guerilla warfare, imperialism, and translations of

³⁷ See Stephen Spender, The Year of the Young Rebels London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Marjorie Hope, Youth Against the World (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970); Junro Fukashiro, "The New Left," Japan Quarterly XVII, (January, 1970), 27-32; and Valdo Spini, "The New Left in Italy," Journal of Contemporary History, VII, (January-April, 1972), 51-71.

³⁸ See Peter Sedgwick, "Varieties of Socialist Thought," in Bernard Crick and William Robson, eds. Protest and Discontent (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 37-67; and Harry Kidd, The Trouble at LSE (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

European theorists such as Adorno, Lukacs, Coletti and Poulantzas. Today it is committed to a "hard" determinist view of Marxism and its purism has extended to doubts about the revolutionary quality of Mao's China.

The original New Left represented a departure from the Old Left in three ways. It rejected the historic agency of transition, abandoned centralization, and focused on cultural as well as economic issues. A certain tactical flexibility accompanied its stress upon the need for immediate social change. The formal democratic procedures of the advanced capitalist societies were rejected in the name of "participatory democracy". Under existing circumstances, it was argued, most decisions are made by inaccessible and irresponsible elites. New Leftists demanded decentralized, participatory forms of university, industrial and territorial government through which students, workers and ordinary citizens could control the determining conditions of their own lives. New Leftists tried to run their own organizations on the basis of voluntary consensus.

Given the end of their activities and the drastic changes such restructuring of the Western politics would require, it is not surprising that New Leftists made limited gains. Their lack of success in changing policies and institutions, however, caused resentment, frustration and radicalization. Certain unfortunate consequences followed. The anti-intellectualism of much of the movement made it good territory for dogmatic ideologists as "practical" tactics failed. The looseness of form following from the ideology of "participatory democracy" made for uncertain continuity of leadership and also facilitated infiltration by organized minorities. In addition, and

perhaps inevitably given the liberal and reformist composition of the Establishments New Leftists confronted, there developed an early tendency to reject the entire liberal tradition. This was accentuated by the dogmatic Marxism of the second phase of the movement. Lastly, militancy was a definite contribution of the New Left but it often ended as a cult of action without thought.

Lacking a thought-out position of its own, the mass movement rushed backward to Marxism rather than taking the time to develop a realistic social theory of its own, and this in spite of rather promising beginnings. New Leftists sought to fill the vacuum by adopting wholesale a Marxian position. Usually, some form of authoritarian leftism was swallowed whole. In addition, there was much rhetoric about "revolution" and sympathetic identification with Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh and, of course, Mao Tse Tung. In the end, the New Left abandoned most of its most acute insights and lost its relevance to advanced capitalist conditions by substituting Marxist sloganeering for creative thought.³⁹

The very democratic and open procedures of the New Leftist organizations were, in the long run, distinctly counter-productive. The rules about non-succession made it difficult to develop continuity of policy and draw upon the expertise of those who had held responsible positions. Without continuity of leadership, there was a lack of learning from experience and a resultant tendency to repeat mistakes. Then again, the loose form of organization, when combined with the "softness" toward Communists resulting from years of over-exposure to

³⁹ See Paul Breines, "From Guru to Spectre," op. cit.

vulgar anti-communism, made for ease of infiltration by organized sectarian Marxian groups bent on getting control. In the United States, the Maoist Progressive Labor Party succeeded in four years in gaining a near-controlling position in SDS. They did not succeed in dominating it only because the organization first split and then disintegrated.⁴⁰

It was perhaps inevitable that the New Left would concentrate its fire upon liberals and reformists. Unfortunately, given the marginal position of the Left in the advanced industrial countries after years of the Cold War, this had the political effect of pushing many people to the Right. It will not do to blame the New Left for its failure to engage in "responsible" coalition tactics: in the days when that might have been feasible it was the centrists who weren't interested in the issues the New Left was addressing. The practical effect, however, was that New Leftists simply rejected the liberal tradition per se. Alienated by hypocritical rhetoric about freedom of speech coming from apologists for American foreign policy, they decided that freedom of speech could not be important. To put it very simply, they threw out the baby with the bath. Instead of trying to make it meaningful, trying to preserve and extend it, they declared it unimportant. And the same went for other elements of the liberal tradition. In practice, they developed a form of authoritarian leftism.

Lastly, one of the most important limitations of the New Left has been its tactical approaches. A variety of useful tactics were tried but just as quickly tried as abandoned if not productive of instant

⁴⁰ See Kirkpatrick Sale, SDS, op. cit.

success. Granted that patience is not always a virtue, the New Left has always had a certain faddism about it. Then, too, its tactical innovations were rarely coordinated and organized in terms of a determined thrust. Much given to spontaneity as a value, the New Left has in a sense always been anti-political. In other words, it has lacked a realistic conception of the road to power and evinced a disdain toward the slow and hard work of party-building. Its substitute for this has been rhetoric about "revolution".

If, in Todd Gittlin's words, the Establishment has been making radicals faster than the Left could turn them off, it is also true that the New Left has been making enemies faster than it could cope with them. To some extent this is attributable to its cult of activity for its own sake. Given the state of mind of most people in the democracies, the New Left has rarely calculated its actions in terms of the probable reactions. Too many things have been done in order to shock, alienate or keep up internal morale. Extreme actions have alienated potential mass support or broken developing organizations. At times, the New Left has seemed to encourage repression by providing suitable pretexts for repressive state intervention.

IV

Laski's philosophy of democratic socialism still offers a viable political orientation for the Left in advanced capitalist society. It combines socialism with democracy, thus offering the substantive measures needed but by means not likely to sacrifice freedom and induce conviction that the cure is not worth the cost. Only such a combination can meet the challenge put to socialists many years ago

by Devere Allen: "For Socialists...the challenge is not to be freer than the worst, but to be really free."⁴¹ Laskian democratic socialism still offers the most viable orientation for Western political man.

⁴¹Devere Allen, "The Conquest of Democracy," American Socialist Quarterly, IV, (March, 1935), 4.

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